The Thirteen Letters

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The Thirteen Letters

by dropdeaddream, WhatAreFears

Summary

Womb to tomb, sweetheart.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

- Translation into Tiếng Việt available: The Thirteen Letters [Mười ba lá thư] by goldcloudy
- Translation into Русский available: Тринадцать Писем by Asperatus, SolidHate

The Thirteen Letters

Credit and thanks to our Winifred Anon for some details of Bucky's home life along with the headcanon that Buck got hooked on Marlboros due to his dates. Super extra special thanks to Leo for all the crazy thorough work on the amazing German translations. A lot of Sarah Rogers' backstory is inspired by “The stone’s in the midst of it all” by togina, so go thank togina for writing something so lovely. And finally, thanks to you guys for sticking with us. Be sure to click on the links in the story -- some of them are live! Notes and sources and fun historical facts in the second chapter. As usual, we're Ellen and Emily.

2010

Individually the features are familiar: the face that looks back at him is a face he recognizes. The broad slope of the nose, the jut of the chin, the serious brow. He shifts his eyes to the right.

Born March 10 of 1917, Sergeant James Barnes was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, where he spent his youth working physically demanding jobs. Barnes’ family was a small one, and numerous accounts confirm that he spent the majority of his time with childhood best friend Steve Rogers. In 1943, Barnes was drafted to the European front. After less than a year of active combat, Barnes’ unit was captured, and he was subjected to torture, isolation, and depravation for, historians have estimated, somewhere between four and eight weeks. In an ironic twist of fate, the prison camp was liberated by none other than…

Instead of reading the rest of it he shuffles along with the other people. They are all being very quiet. Several are bent over a little glass box. Inside is a leather book. It’s too small for everyone to see, and so the pages are copied up in big projections on the walls. The penmanship is nice. His left hand remembers.

Ideals are peaceful. History is violent.

— David Ayer

“Fury”

1941

JAPAN WARS ON U.S. AND BRITAIN;

MAKES SUDDEN ATTACK ON HAWAII;

HEAVY FIGHTING AT SEA REPORTED

(Bruckheimer, Frank L. The New York Times 8 Dec. 1941. Print.)

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166 MONTAGUE ST

SG ROGERS

BKLN NEW YORK

JUST FINE ONLY COLD YOURS BUCK

—

“It had been a long summer,” Colonel Steve Rogers recalled of this telegram during a phone interview with the museum in 2006. “I was on tour, and so it came late, because our old address was on it. My hands were shaking real bad when I opened it. I was so afraid, you know; everyone was so afraid of getting a telegram. That’s why it’s torn. But I finally got it open, right before a show, and I remember I had to sit down backstage for the longest time. I just couldn’t stand up, I was so relieved. I think I was late getting on.”

(Telegram: Barnes, James.14 June 1943. The War in Telegrams: An Interactive Exhibit. Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.)

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1943

Bucky,

Thanks for the telegram and sorry it has taken me so long to write you back, the job is keeping me busy. I can just see your face when you read the postmark on this, but really Jersey isn’t all that bad if you just shut your eyes and hold your breath and pretend hard you aren’t in Jersey. Truth is I can’t tell you what I’m doing in Hoboken any more than you can tell me what you’re doing on the front. But you’ll laugh yourself stupid when I finally see you and you find out. I can guarantee that.

Anyway I’ll keep it short because you probably don’t have much time to read as it is and I know as usual you’re only interested in unwrapping the goods. I bought you smokes, and not the kind you get in rations either. I got your fancy lady smokes. I had to tell the guy at the store they were for my girl, just to let you know. I'm sure the men in your company will enjoy that story, so do please be sure to tell them it. In detail.

But j ust think, you can finally have one in peace without me hacking up a

lung behind you. They should make it past the censors fine, but I didn't think matches would, so I hope that either you have some or you've knocked together enough of those city slicker brain cells to learn how to make a fire. Stranger things have happened.

Write me (or else you might forget how.) I get a little bored sometimes and trying to guess which horrible obscenities they took out of your letters for purposes of public decency and the war effort keeps me busy between work. Plus unlike some people I sure could use the mental exercise. (Hah, hah.) Or maybe you've already sent something and it's in the mailbox now. In that case don't mind this.

Sorry about the drawing on the back. Not much of a view from my window, is it?

Even if it's just to send me the empty pack of smokes. Just send something back. If you get this before September and you write fast enough go on and send it to the return address on the envelope. If not just send it to the apartment. It'll keep.

Your pal Steve

"Come on, give it up," says Dugan. Startled and guilty, Bucky folds up Steve's letter and squints at Dugan in the dim light of their campfire.

"*The smokes*," Dugan clarifies, in a theatrical whisper.

"Aw, hell, Dum Dum," says Bucky, rolling his eyes. "I told you, I don't got any."

"Bullshit," Dugan says. "I know your girl is sending you some. Those envelopes you get always have a little something in them, and this month it was rectangle-shaped. And if they were Lucky Strikes, Barnes, I swear to God —"

"No girl."

Dugan heaves a sigh. "Sorry, Jesus. Your old lady, then? That it? You married?"

Bucky thinks suddenly of Steve's fantastic lack of skill in the kitchen and has to bite down on the inside of his cheek. *Wife* — Jesus. Dugan would get a black eye if Steve ever heard that one. Better guys have wound up with broken noses for less.

"Christ, you *ever* shut up?"

“Look, I’ll trade you some of my D-ration for one cigarette,” Dugan pushes.

“Hope you’ve got matches,” says Bucky, relenting, “Because I’m fresh out.”

He pulls out the pack.

"*Marlboros*?" Dugan asks. "Those are lady's smokes."

"Fuck you too! Guess that's more for me."

"No, come on." Dugan huffs. He does have matches, and he lights Bucky’s cigarette with the same match he uses to light his own, sucking on the tip of his forefinger when the flame burns down too fast and licks his skin. Dugan takes a drag and his eyebrows go up. "These are good."

"Told you. I used to keep 'em around for the girls I was dating, you know, so I could share a smoke if a lady happened to want one."

"Got hooked?"

"Yeah, I like 'em."

Bucky enjoys a taste of the single chocolate square, thick and sickly sweet. He tucks Steve’s letter into his pocket when Dugan isn’t looking and takes a long drag. The smoke catches thickly in his chest, and with the first rush he goes a little lightheaded from the nicotine. With his eyes closed Bucky pictures Steve’s sketch on the back of his letter. Steve can make anything look beautiful with his pencil, but he’s right: that view of Hoboken really is irredeemably shitty. Just a couple of flat buildings and a gray haze in the air. *Jersey* — Jesus Christ, Bucky would rather be on the front than in motherfucking Jersey. That’s what Steve gets, he thinks, for not listening to what Bucky tells him.

He’ll write back tomorrow, after they march. It’s October now, and Steve wrote his letter in September — Steve will be worried. His brow will be furrowing up in the middle; his mouth will be turning down at the corners. Chewing on a thumbnail in that way he has.

When Bucky stirs, down to the end of his smoke now, a glint in the low firelight catches his eye. Dugan’s polishing his brass knuckles. Of course brass knuckles are ten different kinds of illegal in the Army, but Bucky doesn’t see any reason to tell the higher-ups about them, considering how useful they are for hand-to-hand. Dugan’s had them

since Basic. If he gets his sorry ass blown up he's promised they belong to Bucky, and so it's a good investment overall.

Dugan is a man who's prone to filling up silences, and so he talks as he scrubs. "Don't think I ever told you," he says, "Like to think of these as my good luck charm. Helped me out of a lot of scrapes growing up."

"You grew up in goddamn Midtown," says Bucky, squinting at him. "Nobody gets into scrapes in Midtown."

Dugan snorts. "You'd be surprised. I've got this real special ability, see. I can start a fight anywhere. During a picture, on the train…"

Completely despite himself, Bucky feels a smile tug at his mouth. "Know a couple people like that," he admits, closing his eyes again. Rogers, spitting mad, his little fists flying. Bucky hopes to God that he's not planning on opening his mouth in Jersey. It's not a good place to get caught in a dark alley.

"Those *your* good luck charm?" asks Dugan, interrupting Bucky's thoughts. He nods in Bucky's general direction. It takes him a second to get it, but when he does he almost groans out loud.

"Dugan, you're like a dog with a bone," Bucky complains.

"See, they must be," Dugan muses. "Because you're bulletproof, Barnes. —Get it? Bulletproof Barnes. I swear, you're the luckiest son of a bitch I ever met."

That's a good one. "Nah," Buck says.

"Just last week! Got your helmet blown clean off your head while they were shelling us, and not a single scratch on you."

Bucky shoots Dugan his best lazy grin and shrugs, beyond ready for this conversation to be over. "Must be the perfume she sprays on the letters before she sends 'em."

Dugan barks out a laugh. He tucks his brass knuckles back into the pocket where he keeps them hidden. "I'll take first watch, how's that sound?"

"We're marching early tomorrow," Bucky warns.

"Sarge, you're about to drop. Get your beauty rest, cuddle up to your

letters."

"Two hours," Bucky agrees.

His arms and his back ache from carrying the rifle. They really are marching early tomorrow, and Bucky can already feel in his bones that it's going to be an ugly fight. He might as well get some shut-eye now. He settles himself down curled up by his gun and starts composing his letter back to Steve. It's fine out here, just fine, he'll write. Warm sometimes, even. He'll find a story to tell. One of Dugan's dirty jokes, or a licentious description of French girls. He wants Steve to laugh.

By the time dawn breaks murky and pink on the horizon they've already been humping for a mile through the cold wet of Austria. There's a lot of waiting to be had in war, and the shelling doesn't start until dusk. Time bleeds and stretches. It lasts for maybe an hour or two before the enemy pulls back. But then something strange happens to the ground. It tilts and shifts and vibrates beneath them. The dirt is disturbed; it bounces and hums. For a moment he's convinced it's an earthquake. Then he sees the tanks.

—

"Are you trying to die?" is what Dugan keeps hissing at him.

"M'not," Bucky slurs. "I'm not. They were gonna kill that kid."

"And now they're gonna kill *you*," Dugan says, and then swears, "Jesus," and tries to catch Bucky when he stumbles — but he grabs him wrong, and it just makes his ribs hurt more.

The prisoners here turn into apes by night, climbing the bars and screaming profanities, usually stuck with cattle prods for their trouble. Bucky is glad for when it's day and some of them are put to work. But then night comes, and they take another man off to wherever they're taking them. By morning it's time to put the body in the furnace. The smell was terrible at first. Metallic: sometimes burning steak, and sometimes musky-sweet. A thick perfume.

"Gettin' the shit beat out of you for a Jap," Dugan says, angry.

"Japs're supposed to be their allies, ain't they? So what the hell were they tryin' to take him for? They better take me. I got Gypsy blood anyway."

“No you don’t, sit the fuck down.”

Bucky laughs, a little delirious from the pain. “Fuck you, I do. Half Gypsy; my ma’s side. Number’s up.”

“It ain’t.”

“It is,” Bucky insists. And it’s not just that: he’s a queer, on top of it. He imagines the telegram that Steve will see. THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT…

He’s almost relieved when it turns out he’s right: the next day they shove a bag over his head and march him along a hallway that winds and twists and turns. The room has no windows. The air is still and thick. There is a long steel table, and on it are needles and restraints; he stumbles and falls, and when he lands again he finds himself in a nightmare. He feels hunger. He smells his own skin, and he smells it burn. The masks the men inside wear are white, and they flash and search, and they call him home — like the beacons of a lighthouse in the night.

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The light blinds him. They speak German. They cut him. They pump him full of chemicals. Their hands are cold. They speak German. They cut him: ribs, hands, soles of his feet —

“Come on, you big lug.” A huge hard arm lands around Bucky’s shoulders and he starts, jerked abruptly from the dizzy memory. Steve towers above him. When Bucky tries to stand he stumbles, but Captain America grabs him, steadying, and tries to catch his eye.

“What’re you staring at?” Bucky demands.

Even in the dark light of the bar Bucky can see Steve’s face heat up. It’s glorious, and it reminds him that he isn’t still on Arnim Zola’s table.

“Not staring at anything,” Steve lies, caught out.

Bucky, his head swimming more from exhaustion than the Glenfiddich, decides to let it go. “Where’d Agent Carson go?” He damn well knows Agent Carter’s name. Bucky digs up a smile so brittle that he expects his face to crack clean in two. “She must be waitin’ up for you. Cap.”

Steve flushes darker. It isn't half as satisfying, somehow, as it was a second ago. "I'm sure she's going to make an early night of it. Besides, who else is going to help your sorry self back to your bunk?"

"Well, don't let me hold you up." Bucky can feel his teeth in his mouth and knows his smile is sharklike and mean. "Can't keep the little lady __"

"Come on, get up," interrupts Steve. He tugs Bucky away from the bar; Bucky stumbles a little and catches himself, afraid of putting too much weight against Steve. And then he realizes that's not much of a problem anymore, and so he goes ahead and leans against him while they weave their way out of the pub. It's muggy but cold outside. Bucky doesn't feel drunk, but he is exhausted. The air helps wake him up.

"Sorry I never got around to writing you back," says Bucky. Their shoulders knock together, but it feels all wrong: shifted a little up, a little to the left. The whole world tonight feels that way.

"Well, now you don't have to worry about it, huh?" Steve asks. Bucky's afraid to look at him; that smile is too damn much. He can only take so much torture in a week. *God above,* he thinks bleakly. I should be a comedian.

"I mean, we'll be in the same company. You'll get sick of me soon enough," Steve continues.

"Sure thing, Rogers," Bucky says. It isn't too long of a walk back to where they're staying, real rooms for real POW's, Bucky guesses, just a block down from the pub in a weary apartment complex that's probably more dangerous than a foxhole. They've only got it for this one night, and only because the village was so close to camp, but Bucky is far from complaining; he'll take what he can get, and a real bed is much better than the steel table he thought he'd be sleeping on tonight anyway.

They come up on the building, and Bucky gives the door a jimmy to get it open.

"Just like home, huh?" He asks over his shoulder. The floorboards creak terribly and a G.I. upstairs clearly decided to get the party started early with a couple of squealing girls. Bucky thinks of Carter in that red dress all tight across her body and feels sharply and unexpectedly jealous. He should have tried harder — he could have picked her up, even with Steve there. He could already have her red

lipstick on his collar; he could already be forgetting about this terrible day. Drinking didn't work. Carter might have.

Steve doesn't say anything, his brow pinched in concern, as he follows him up the stairs. He hovers while Bucky unlaces his boots and takes off his jacket and sits down on the bed. Annoyance is tight in Bucky's throat. He's tired; he wants to sleep; he wants this guy with his commanding tone and his pressed uniform gone. He wants Steve back.

Bucky forces another smile. "What, Stevie," he says, "Don't tell me I'm the most interesting thing you've got to be watching right now. Because that dame, she sure had —"

"Bucky."

"What?"

Steve studies him for a second with that face he makes: his eyes sharp, his mouth pinched at one side. Hard and frustrated. "Are you…" he struggles visibly with the words. "Will you be — okay? Tonight, I mean. On your own."

"Docs did a fine job of looking over me," Bucky replies. That was after, of course, he remembered how to breathe when they came at him with their shiny little instruments. His chest tightens up dangerously at the memory and so he pushes it down. Bucky spreads his arms and tries to grin, but it comes out bitter: he tastes confusion and his own cruelty, sharp like bile. "All in one piece, see? I mean, maybe not such an impressive piece as you, but you can't fault me. It's been a long week."

Exhaustion tugs him down. He waves a hand at Steve and a pain grows in his chest that he doesn't have a name for. He wants to bury himself in the musty sheets of this sad excuse for a bed until he wakes up back in Brooklyn, like in The Wizard of Oz. And maybe Brooklyn is in black and white the same way as Kansas, but Bucky's sick to death of color — sick to death of all the red.

"Bucky," says Steve again.

"Listen, I was serious about you catching up with your girl. Take a couple pointers from the guy a room over; lady who wears red like that, I bet you that she's a fucking tiger in the —"

"The hell's wrong with you?" Steve snaps. Bucky's words stop short,

and, to his intense humiliation, Steve's sharp tone causes his throat to close right up and his vision to blur. Get a hold of yourself, Bucky tells himself, but he can't.

"Nothin', Rogers," Bucky lies, and badly. He swallows hard. The smile won't come. "Fitter than a fiddle."

Steve looks torn between granting Bucky the dignity of his lie and forcing him to drain the truth out like an infected wound. But Bucky is still caught in his fever dream. Suddenly he's not only sure that everything around him is unreal, but that he is, too.

"Bucky?" Steve is saying. His hands are warm and big on Bucky's neck, and Bucky's vision swims: he can't breathe. "Buck! — Bucky, come on —"

Bucky closes his eyes and tries to catch his breath. It doesn't work, and he's aware of Steve's hands while he hovers scared. Abruptly he's convinced that this is it: this is how he's going to die. He curls a hand around his abdomen where everything is spinning and his vision starts to blot out. A hand closes over his. It presses his thumb to a wrist and he feels under the pad of it a steady and strong pulse of blood beneath skin. He tucks his head down. He tries to match his breathing to it.

"There," Steve is saying, though he sounds scared, too. "Alright, see? You're right here."

Bucky is jolted with concern, because he'll break Steve's wrist if he holds on any tighter. But then he opens his eyes and sees that Steve's whole arm is bigger and healthier, even if the veins underneath the pale skin are just as blue and fragile as ever. Steve, no matter the fact that he's bigger than a house, is just fine; they're just fine here, together.

Bucky looks at him, hard. "Your asthma's gone, huh?" he asks finally.

"Yeah," agrees Steve. He gives Bucky a smile. When he moves his hands away their knees bump; Bucky realizes belatedly that Steve is sitting now on the bed beside him. "I can run now, too. Lift things. And I heal pretty fast."

He's trying not to sound proud but he's doing a bad job of it. Bucky doesn't have it in him anymore to be angry, and so he just looks at him, the way he couldn't in the pub. The jaw might be squarer, the neck definitely thicker, but it's still Steve's face. He'd recognize that face anywhere. He'd probably recognize it if he were blind. And

individually, it turns out, it's the features that are the same: the dark brows, those big baby blues, that pretty little mouth. Even his big ugly nose.

Bucky has never been so relieved in his entire life. It's Steve. It's just Steve, spitfire Steve, with his serious face and his knobby, capable hands. It's Steve, same as always.

"Couldn't fix that, though," says Bucky, and nods at the offending extremity.

Steve eyes go wide and then he starts chuckling, kicking at Bucky's socked foot with his boot. Thank God for Steve's nose, Bucky thinks, delirious. That awful crooked beak with the big bump in the middle. If whatever chemicals they gave Steve had fixed his nose, Bucky thinks he would have actually lost his mind.

"And who the hell's fault was that?" Steve asks, still grinning. But he keeps looking at Bucky, and looking at him, and his face becomes something different. The moment settles heavily around them, and softly Steve says, "Buck."

"Just a little shaken up," Bucky admits, because he has to, now. His voice is hoarse, and he feels raw and blown open, like shutters smacking against their window in a storm. "It'll pass, you'll see. All I need is a good night's sleep."

"I'll stay here," Steve offers, stiltedly. "Sleep on the floor. In case you — you know."

Annoyed, Bucky wants him to clarify. In case he what? In case he forgets how to breathe again and starts shaking apart in the middle of the night? He isn't strong like Steve — isn't brave. He doesn't want to be alone, but he doesn't want to need this. He's a soldier now.

"I'll be fine," Bucky says, tamping it down. The smile comes out a little better now, and Bucky waves a hand. "Seriously, Steve. Get out of here. Night's still young."

He avoids mentioning Agent Carter on purpose, because it didn't work before and it won't help now. But still Steve looks unsure.

"I'm only gonna fall asleep," Bucky insists, and tries to sound as honest as he can. "Scout's honor, Stevie. I'm beat."

Steve huffs out a breath and nods. "Yeah, okay," he says. He reaches

out and squeezes the top of Bucky's shoulder with a new and stunning strength. Bucky didn't even realize how tightly he was holding himself until Steve's hand forces the tension to bleed away. Steve shakes him gently, and sways him a little, and then he lets go, standing from the poor abused bed with an audible creak. He tugs his dress uniform straight and his pins glint, needles in a haystack, in the dim seedy light.

"You're never doin' that again," Bucky says suddenly.

"What?" Steve is already halfway across the room. Like all the emotions Bucky has experienced tonight, he feels it wash over him, intense and unexpected and sudden: he has never been so angry in his life. The fury scares him.

"I said," Bucky's voice shakes, "You ain't ever doing that again. Do you hear me? Don't you ever follow me into Hell, Steve. Not ever."

"That isn't even close to fair and you know it," Steve bites. He's angry, too — finally. Silence falls for a second, and then quietly and stormily he adds, "Goodnight, Buck. Get some rest, please."

"Yeah," says Bucky, belatedly, and to an empty room.

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Colonel Phillips stares at Steve with a sort of hard exasperation that says he knows he should have been expecting this. "Rogers," he begins, "Private Dugan I'll sanction, and Sergeant Barnes is the best goddamn gunman in the US Army. But here's the problem. I'm not entirely sure if you've noticed, but it's illegal for two of these men to serve alongside you, and another two aren't even enlisted in the US Army at all, considering that they're from, oh, foreign countries."

"Sir, you've allowed me the freedom to make my own selection. These are the best men I've ever had the honor of fighting alongside."

Phillips squints. "They're the *first* men you've ever had the honor of fighting alongside."

"They each have a unique skill set that will be invaluable in the field. We've proven that we work excellently as a team —"

"And," interjects Agent Carter, "The SSR operates internationally, Colonel Phillips. We work with Allied soldiers from all over the world. It isn't so odd to incorporate two men from the French and British

reserves."

"Anyone got any excuses for breaking the damn law by adding in Private Jones and Private Morita?" Phillips demands. "Anyone?"

Steve sets his jaw. "With all due respect, sir," he says, "You make them walk, I'm just fine on the bond sales circuit."

Well, thinks Bucky, that's a filthy lie, but at least Steve is good at bluffing. He's peripherally aware of Jones and Morita shifting beside him.

"We can win this war without you, Rogers," Phillips says, but it's with no particular venom, and instead just a solid kind of annoyance. Bucky experiences something very disturbing: for the first time in his life he sympathizes immensely with his CO. He wants to get the guy a drink. He knows.

"I don't doubt that," Steve is saying, "But you might win it a hell of a lot faster with us."

"What the hell," Phillips finally sighs. He points a finger at Steve. "If this goes pear-shaped, Rogers, you're going down with me, and we'll both end up dishonorably discharged, miserable assholes with disgraced names. I hope you understand that. This is about as close as I come to a personal favor. Don't you dare think of asking me for anything else for the rest of your sad life. I'll be pulling a lot of goddamn strings to make this happen, and you sure as hell better hope you don't make me regret it."

"Yes, sir," Steve says, saluting.

And now here they are, this ragtag bunch of so-called professionals, camped out for the night and waiting for dawn to march to their next assignment in the countryside of France. The unit was drooping with exhaustion and so Bucky volunteered for watch. The territory around them is deserted and quiet, and the fire is burning low.

Steve, he writes, and after a moment scratches it out. He scratches until the name is gone altogether from the page and obliterated completely by the black. Without the distractions of the day Bucky becomes acutely aware that in his boots his feet are sore. The cuts have finally stopped reopening and bleeding all over the inside of his socks, and the scabs, even, are weirdly healed — but there's a newness to the soles of his feet, a surprising and strange tenderness that doesn't feel like any other scar Bucky has on his body, and the skin there is

baby pink and sensitive, not a numb white. Even the rub of his wool socks hurts.

He thinks about this, and chews on his pen.

It sits wrong that he never wrote Steve back. It's an irrational annoyance. He couldn't have written back anyway: the post was too far delayed. But Bucky knows that when Steve didn't get a reply to that letter back in August he was afraid that he was writing to a dead man, and the truth is he might as well have been.

Stevie, Bucky tries again. He scratches it out too. The journal he's writing in is uncommonly nice: he bought it for Steve, between Basic and shipping out. He had figured he might as well spend the money because he probably wasn't coming back anyway. But Steve kept refusing it, and he kept pushing it back into Bucky's hands, and finally he just told him he should keep it, and use it while he was away.

That was how they used to say it. "Away," and not "to war."

Maybe three pages are torn out. Bucky has written Steve more letters than that, but not from this notebook. It cost him a pretty penny. He wouldn't mind if it was Steve writing and drawing in it, but he doesn't like doing it himself. It feels somehow wasteful. He doesn't have talented hands the way that Steve does.

A branch cracks somewhere deeper in the forest. Bucky tenses, and reaches for the knives he keeps strapped now in his boots. But it's no one; probably just some little bunny rabbit. The stillness that has settled over him dissipates, and he is aware, in a way he never has been before, of each one of his limbs: of his heart beating in the quiet stillness of the night.

He puts his pen back down on the paper and decides to stop worrying altogether. He doesn't even have to address it, he figures. It's not like Steve needs to read it anyway. They're in the same company, just like he said before; there's no real need for Bucky to send a letter back anymore. He thinks that if he just puts something down then maybe he can think about something else. And so he just writes down what comes to mind.

What I wouldn't God damn give, Bucky finally manages, *for you to have been this healthy three years ago, that winter when you almost died on me in the middle of the night from that rattle in your chest. I spent one month scared as hell that you were going to stop breathing and then two weeks worrying that the next time you coughed there'd be blood in your hand,*

and you'd be gone from me just like that, same way as your mama before you, God rest her soul. I didn't think I could stand it, having to bury you. Even now I'd rather eat my own gun than see you dead.

Bucky's hands don't shake when he's scared or nervous anymore; he wouldn't be the best sniper in the US Army if they did. It's been beaten out of him well and good. But he feels something burning and panicked rush through him all the same as the truth stares back at him from the page.

I hate them, Bucky continues. He can't stop now. He could never say this out loud. The fact is terrifying and giddy. *I hate them for what they did to you. You won't ever understand that, I don't think. I mean, sure, I'm glad that you're finally in one piece and I don't have to worry about a strong wind knocking you over. I'm glad you don't have bad lungs and that it doesn't hurt when you walk for too long. The outside finally matches the inside, and now everyone — the whole world, I guess — can see just what it is you're made of. I'm not mad about that.*

It's selfish maybe but I didn't want you out here. When I shipped out I kept thinking, at least he's stowed away safe. I even thought, when I get myself killed out there, maybe it'll convince him to stop trying to get in. And that was the one good thing I had in my head every time I was listening to enemy fire, convinced I wasn't making the march back. So what if you volunteered, like you said. You've always been your own. The one thing you've always been, hell or high water, is your own. Can't deny you that. I would never try besides. But you're going to see killing, these next couple days. You're going to see the truth of the world, and the hell that lives inside. So answer me this, and be honest now: Isn't that just trading out one sickness for another?

—

"He's breakin' my heart," Bucky sighs, and then yells, "Stevie! You're breakin' my heart."

Steve flips him off without turning around. It's not that he doesn't have good aim — his aim is fine, really. He just doesn't have much experience, and it shows.

It's raining, but not a cold rain, or a heavy one. It's always raining outside Italy, and when it isn't raining there's enough mist to make up for it. Dugan and Bucky and the rest of the team have huddled under a messily assembled tarp, sitting on overturned crates and rickety, liberated stools. Around them the camp rustles with NCOs trudging

through the muck and men screaming from the med tent. It's quiet, all things considered. A quiet day. Waiting on orders. There's much less busywork to do in a commando unit. Bucky could get used to this. It's the life.

Steve takes a shot at a soup can yards away on the fence, and it hits, and zings into the mud. Jones whoops. Steve takes another, and misses.

"Cap ever been on the front? I mean, front lines?" asks Dugan.

"No," Bucky says, and squints, watching Steve reload. "No, he has not."

He knows Dugan and Morita exchange a look. There's something different about being on the front lines. It changes a man. It explains a lot, Bucky thinks, about how Steve is. He stands and lights up a cigarette and walks over to him.

"Hand it over," Bucky says. Steve does. It's Bucky's rifle, anyway. "I know what your problem is. It shoots different when the barrel is hot. In combat you ain't gonna get the chance to let it cool down, not if you're in a position where you're having to pick them off during a melee. My girl tends to go left. So tug it right, you understand? You'll feel it. Gentle." He demonstrates. Bang-pop, and the furthest can disappears. Dugan and Falsworth applaud like they're at a golf tournament, and Bucky turns around and gives a dignified bow.

Steve takes the gun back, but he's looking at him. "You really are the best in the Army, aren't you?"

Bucky shrugs, and takes a drag off his cigarette. It's not that he's being bashful; it's just that he doesn't like to think about it. Sometimes he hopes he'll wake up and forget how to hold a gun altogether. "They picked me out during Basic, gave me some training. I couldn't tell you about it. Wasn't allowed."

"Then why were you on the front lines?" How'd you get captured, is the real question. Why weren't you being put to use the right way? Steve still doesn't know how the Army really works. It's possible he never really will, at this rate. Commando units are different than working in the infantry, or the tanks, or even the caissons. It's more dangerous, of course, what they're doing now. But there's something about being in the trenches that Steve will never understand.

Thank God for that.

“107th’s CO got blown up,” Bucky says. “Weren’t enough men, and they needed someone sent in. It was me or the secretary.”

Steve huffs a laugh. It’s funny, but Bucky isn’t joking — it really would have been the secretary. Steve gets the next shot.

“Good,” Bucky says, and grabs the back of Steve’s neck to give him a little shake, proud. “Real good, Rogers.”

Steve ducks his head. “Alright, alright.”

“They teach you how to shoot a pistol?”

“Not as good as you can, probably.”

Bucky looks at him for a moment. He leans closer and keeps his voice low. Nobody else needs to hear this. “You kill anyone?”

“What?”

“Have you killed anyone yet?”

Steve thinks about it. “I think so. No, I must have. There was — yeah,” Steve says. He’s just realizing it. “Yeah. Yes, I have. Four or five. Maybe more.”

“It bother you?”

“No,” Steve decides. “No, I was doin’ it — well. In the base. I was doing it for a reason.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, Buck.“ Steve’s mouth is a thin, pale line. He squares his shoulders, like he’s ready to fight about it again, and says: “I had to.”

A huge and wonderful and dreadful feeling wells inside Bucky. This is just like anything else with Steve: if Steve wants to follow him down this road he’s going to do it, and nothing Bucky does can stop that. So now they’ll kill for each other, just the way they’ve fought for each other, just the way they’d die for each other. So it is. He grabs Steve by the neck again, and digs his fingers into the short hair at the back of his head, and pulls him closer fiercely, pressing his mouth to his temple and then pushing him away.

“Get your pistol out,” Bucky says. “Come on. You can’t shoot for shit with that, and it’s what you should really be practicing with, anyway.”

Working with Steve in the war, it turns out, isn't that much different from working with Steve back home. This is to say that most of their strategizing consists of Bucky saying *no* while Steve repeats *yes* until Bucky finally throws up his hands and also says yes, subsequently regretting every single decision he has ever made in his life leading up to that exact moment. Infuriating might be the right word. Even worse is that Steve has decided it's fun to jump out of exploding buildings. The only real difference from being with Steve back home is that now instead of being saddled with a very small madman Bucky is with a very large one, and it's this madman that the American people have gone gaga over.

People want pictures, and they want newsreels. Steve flashes his smile for everyone these days, but it's the wrong smile — tight around the corners, and a little rueful, like he sees what he's doing, and he's making fun of it to himself, this whole insane situation. Sometimes their eyes meet, and the tilt of Steve's brow changes — can you believe this shit? — and it makes Bucky break character, and laugh.

"Sergeant, please, if you'd just — just stand there," one of the film directors tells him. "You're special ops, aren't you? We got enough smiling guys. Stand there; hold your gun. Just — brood."

It isn't hard to do. And Bucky understands, too: his smile, these days, is killer.

—

They fucked me up, writes Bucky that night, furtive — before lights out, after his shower. *But I don't ever wanna tell you just how bad.*

—

Dermatologists hate him! No, but really: why does Steve Rogers still look thirty?

In a recent reevaluation of Dr. Abraham Erksine's surviving notes, UC Berkeley scientists say that Rogers' incredibly decreased aging is actually a result of his enhanced healing factor. A basic rundown? The "Super Soldier" serum, scientists hypothesize, treats aging cells the same way it treats injured cells: it heals them. As a result, Rogers' tissue just keeps regenerating.

"Next we hope to study how Colonel Rogers survived the plane crash of 1945," said Doctor Abha Malik, the project's faculty advisor, adding, "Unfortunately for us, he's a hard man to find these days."

Read more about the developing research here .

(Johnson, James. "Super-Soldier Breakthrough." Yahoo! News. New York, New York, 2007. Web.)

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Steve breaks bones like he used to spill apples working at Mister Eli's grocery. He asks Bucky to snap his shoulder back into place twice in the first month and spends one week having to crunch and reposition his fingers after each op because he can't seem to stop catching his shield wrong. It's disgusting. Steve loves it.

"I don't," Steve tells him.

"Quit lyin'," Bucky says, and then, "Bite down," but Steve is grinning, and grimacing, and refuses to, and so Bucky just rights his kneecap without any warning. Steve sweats and tries to tamp down a high, hurt groan, and Bucky almost dislocates his knee again because he's so angry.

"Stop doin' this," Bucky tells him. "Or at least stop *liking* it so much."

"Shit," Steve laughs, groaning: high on it.

—

15. Drumroll, please, for the final mystery of history: James Barnes' shortest (and bitchiest) letter.

"You piss me off so God damn much. Jesus Roosevelt Christ. I've got your number, you reckless f—ing dumbass."

Only your best friend can talk to you like that. No one's really sure why Sergeant Barnes was so ticked off, but apparently even Captain America can be annoying. Who knew?

(Warren, Cate. "Top Fifteen Mysteries of History." Buzzfeed. New York, New York, 2012. Web.)

—

hipsterodysseus:

> okay, but: nobody in the history of the universe hated captain

america as much as james barnes hated captain america, and i think
that's beautiful.

sansastarks:

lbr, he appreciated the costume tho.

#omfg #history #SO BAD #SO GOOD #queer things

—

This is the God's honest truth: I hated that asshole. With his big pearly whites and his spit-shined uniform — what kind of sorry schmuck lets somebody dress him up like that? — prancing around in his tights and acting like he knows what it means to lay in the mud for six days straight, what it feels like when the enemy's got too close and the only thing left to do is close your hands around their neck and lock your muscles up and wait until the life snuffs out.

I've done that. You've seen me.

One kid, just a little after I shipped out, not even three months in, he showed up back from leave with the comic books. I laughed in his God damn face. I ain't proud of it, but I did. I was sore and tired and couldn't get that smell out of my nose, like car parts on a hot day at the garage. Felt like I was bathing in it. Still do. Blood doesn't wash out, no matter what they tell you. Not even cold water can do it. So anyway I'm standing there in my boots that are getting holes in them and I'm reeking like the cold mud and shit and whatever the hell else I'd been stepping in, and this green kid settles down by the fire, his eyes too big for his face the way yours used to be, his uniform all clean, and he pulls out this comic book. I about lost it right then. I didn't know if I was going to yell or cry or sock him one, but it was like there was a huge rushing in my ears and I couldn't think past the anger. Right then all I could think was of that kid's body laying on the ground, his eyes staring sightless and bloodshot up at mine. I didn't want that thought to belong to me. I hated thinking it, but I couldn't make the image go away. In the end I reigned it in; you'd be proud. All I said was, that mook doesn't give a shit about you, pal. He's never fought in a war and he never will.

And Jesus Christ, how's that for irony?

But later I felt like shit and apologized, and even later that kid got his arm

blown off by a Kraut hand grenade and was shipped back home. So whatever that says. War stories don't really have much by way of morals or lessons, but I figured I'd tell it anyway.

I don't still hate him, or at least not the same way that I used to. How could I? It's impossible. Got his patch sewn on my left arm and everything. And I'll wear it, too, until the day I die. I'll tell you, I should have appreciated that comic book while I had the God damn chance. I was stupid then. The colors in it were so bright and vivid, so much nicer than the gray and green we've got here. But when he got carted out of the field he had his comic books in his pack and they shipped home with him. So all that color he brought is back home, now. Which is alright. I figure that's where those types of happy things belong.

—

"You know what the worst part is about being out here?"

Steve huffs a sigh. "You're supposed to be asleep, Buck."

Bucky twists around in the foxhole they've dug. There's no light except for the moon and stars, and it's almost nice for a second, laying there on the ground; almost like they're on the camping trip they always joke about going on. But where are we gonna go camping, Buck? Steve will ask, to which Bucky always replies by rote: Central Park, of course! Under a bench, Steve, where else?

It's not so funny now. It actually wasn't ever funny, except in that strange way that only Steve and Bucky can make each other laugh, because Steve's sense of humor is twisted and dry, and Bucky loves it, dearly. They could never let anyone else in on that joke, of course: hundreds of people really did camp out in Central, and around other places in the city, when Hoover was in office — and now, too. Poverty lends to a certain sense of humor. It has to.

Bucky punches Steve's thigh to get his attention. "Don't wanna sleep," he says. The truth is he doesn't need to sleep. Familiar sickish dread curls inside of him, but he focuses on Steve's grimy moonlit face and shoves the feeling away. "So: guess."

"Guess what?" Steve asks. He's only playing at being annoyed now, his eyebrows twitching in that tell-tale way they have.

"Worst part of being out here."

"Aw, Buck, don't say the food; that stuff's gourmet." Steve never talks

like that in front of the guys; it startles Bucky into a laugh.

“Nah. Try again.”

Steve’s shirking his watch duties now, resting his back against their dirt wall. His shoulders are too big for them to sit side by side, but he twists around so that they fit anyway, facing Bucky a little more. “I don’t know. Nice soft pillows?”

Bucky tries to stamp down his laugh, considering it’s the dead of night and they’re technically in enemy territory. It works, sort of. He knows this conversation isn’t really that funny, and he knows that the jokes are anemic, but it isn’t his fault: he just likes seeing Steve act like himself again.

“Nope,” Bucky says. “Third time’s a charm.”

Steve heaves a huge put-upon sigh. “Having to stare at your ugly mug, day in, day out…”

Bucky socks him in the shoulder.

“…And just the other day when I thought something had died and realized it was just the smell of your shirt — Christ!”

They grapple pretty uselessly, kicking at each other and getting dust everywhere. Steve cries uncle after a second, laughing breathless and quiet, mindful of keeping his voice down. Bucky shoves him, feeling like his grin’s about to split his face in half, and Steve shoves back. “So what is it?” asks Steve, and the smile is still bright in his blue eyes.

“Hmm?” Bucky asks dumbly. Their foxhole is tinier than the single bed they could afford back at home, and their legs press close together. Bucky is distracted. Bucky is always distracted.

“Worst thing,” Steve reminds him. Bucky falls silent. Steve jostles him with his shoulder. “It’s the cold, isn’t it. Know how you feel about the cold.”

“Nah,” corrects Bucky, softer now. “Listen for a second.”

Obediently Steve does. After a moment there’s a line of confusion in his brow. He opens his mouth but Bucky answers before he can ask. “Quiet,” Bucky says, and looks into Steve’s eyes, dark and navy in the still of the night. “So goddamn quiet. Where’s the sounds of the city,

huh? Kids breaking bottles in the street. Horns honking until six in the morning. Police sirens. Mangy cats yowling outside. You remember that? It's hard as hell to sleep without it."

"It was hard as hell to sleep *with* it," Steve says. After a moment he murmurs, "I know, though. I know what you mean."

"Knew you would," admits Bucky quietly. Steve's face is retrospective and gloomy and his lashes cast big shadows along his cheeks when he looks down. Bucky doesn't like seeing that look, and so he nudges Steve again. "You know how in the summer —"

"You *hated* that," Steve says, laughing to himself. "Never stopped your goddamn complaining…"

Bucky chuckles, quiet. When he was a kid, before the Barneses became completely destitute like the rest of America, his mama would take him and Becca out to her childhood home in Connecticut for one month every summer. There was fresh air, and lots and lots of green grass, and big trees, and flowers all over. Bucky hated it. Bucky despised it. He thought Hartford was absolutely hell on Earth, and at ten could not for the life of him understand why anyone would ever prefer it over life in the city. Every year when he got back he would climb the Rogers' fire escape and wake Steve up and complain about how inescapably awful it had been. Steve was always terribly sympathetic. "I believe you, Buck," he would sigh, that mightily heavy sigh he had even at nine, and push Bucky's hair back from his face. "We won't ever go there, I promise."

And then at fourteen, when the doctor wanted Steve to move somewhere with clean air, but nobody could afford it. Steve had been apprehensive and angry, and he hadn't wanted to leave the neighborhood. "I'll set you up in Hartford," Bucky had said, chivalrous, sincere, and Steve, predictably, punched him in the stomach.

They aren't there, of course — Connecticut is much nicer than where they are. But still Bucky wouldn't trade it, in the end. After all, there's no Steve in Connecticut.

He looks to Steve, who is smiling quietly and around the eyes. He's so much happier these days. Bucky doesn't understand why it is that they can't ever seem to match up. Steve is sick; Bucky is well. Steve is well, and Bucky is shaking apart at the seams. It's a terrible and unfair see-saw.

Bucky elbows him. He wants to stop thinking about it. “What, you hopin’ the Krauts will attack while our guard is down? Keep watch, you lazy lug. Let me get some shut-eye.”

Steve slants him that curious Steve-smile, the one that says he’s got Bucky’s number. He shimmies himself back up to watch out anyway. Neither of them actually sleep a wink the whole night, but as usual they both do a fine job of pretending.

—

I saw it — did you know that? I did. You’ve always been sentimental in stupid ways, can never say it out loud, always got to find a different way to show it. I get it, you know. I do. Hell, I did almost the same thing with your letters before I lost them, keeping them tucked up in my pocket every time I was out in the field. And isn’t that a riot and a half?

Maybe you think about it like a good luck charm. Or maybe you just like to see her pretty face — I wouldn’t blame you. I’d like her for myself if it wasn’t plain as day to me the way you are about her. Remember what your ma used to say? “Gone in the head.” Well that’s what you are. If there wasn’t a war on you two would already be living upstate in some real nice brownstone with two dogs and a kid. As it is, when the two of you get out of this alive, that’s where you’ll end up anyway. Don’t be nervous about it. She’ll say yes. She’d say yes if you asked right now. She’d wear a God damn ring from a Cracker Jack box if it was all you had, trust me on that. She’s your forever girl.

At least those are the things I’m gonna tell you the night before you propose, nervous and pacing and wanting to practice on me. Then again, maybe I won’t live to see it. Sometimes I hope to God I won’t. When it comes right down to it I don’t know that I’ll be able to do it. I don’t know if I’ve got it in me; I don’t know if I can just stand there while you seal the deal. I’m no good at watching you walk away from me.

You know, after the table, when they took me in to question me about what happened, they gave me an out. They told me they’d discharge me and I could go home — I’m serious. Due to psychological injury, they said. Do you understand that? I think about it every God damn day of my life. I could have gone home. I could be home right now. I could be sitting in our ugly little shoebox trying to get the radiator to work. I could be at the fish market, or even taking a girl on a date. But God fucking save me, I couldn’t do it. My one dream came true but I didn’t take it because I didn’t want to watch you leave. Not quite yet. I’m selfish and I want to hang on until I can’t anymore.

The God's honest truth is that I ain't ever gonna love again. She's your true north. I know what that means, because you're mine.

1944

Though many aspects of this particular operation still remain classified and a number of details are debatable, it is a fact that the freshly-minted Howling Commandos ran an operation in 1944 that successfully dismantled one of the largest HYDRA bases in Luxembourg, resulting in what is arguably one of the most legendary feats of bravery documented during the Second World War. Because there is no definitive account of what occurred during this mission, this biography can only relay what is definitely known.

It is fact that in September of 1944, the Howling Commandos successfully infiltrated the Luxembourg base. Their mission likely involved gaining intelligence, though the subsequent comic book (see "Captain America, Issue Twelve", page 260) echoes an earlier feat, claiming the purpose of the operation was to rescue American prisoners of war. Whatever the mission was, however, it was almost certainly time-sensitive, as many HYDRA bases were rigged with a self-destruct function should they be compromised. It was when the Commandos discovered that detonation was imminent that Barnes asked Rogers how they would escape. Famously, Rogers replied, "By God's graces, we will have enough time."

(Cochran, Stacey, and Randall Cross. A Boy From Brooklyn: The Authorized Biography of Captain America. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950. Print.)

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They just keep pouring in, two, five, eleven, and their heavy boots thunk and screech across the floor. All Bucky can think to do is try to hold them off best he can so they can't reach the rest of the team, who he hopes to God is finishing the mission. After two deafening and eternal minutes Bucky finally runs out of ammo. He ducks behind the

bullet-riddled conference table of the situation room and draws his Colt. When he's upright again he fires one magazine into the increasing fray before a man is on him from behind while he reloads. Bucky twists away and dives for the soldier's gun. The soldier might have the advantage of armor but Bucky is stronger and faster, and they go down together from the force of his body. They grapple but the soldier doesn't stand a chance. With a curious silence in his head Bucky finally gets the loaded pistol, pins the other man with his knees, and shoots him three times in the head through his black mask. He drops the HYDRA gun — it's empty — and reloads his own, staying low. The sightless goggles of the soldier's mask stare up at him while he picks them off before they can get through the door.

He's fired four bullets and has four more left when there are shots fired from the other side. The soldiers start dropping like flies and Dernier rounds the corner, followed closely by Steve and Falsworth.

The rest of the HYDRA in the room is taken care of quickly, and when Morita finally shoots the last operative's brains out he spits on the body. Steve jogs over to Bucky. There's a tear in his cowl where a cut bleeds high on his cheek. Bucky doesn't like the look on his face.

"What?"

"It's rigged to blow," Steve pants, loud enough for the other guys, licking wounds and checking cartridges, to hear. "We gotta get out of here."

Bucky remembers the labyrinthine hallways that led him to this room and stops short. "You think we got enough time?" he asks.

Steve sucks in a breath. "I sure goddamn hope so."

Of course Bucky didn't count his turns, and he has a split-second of panic before he realizes that Steve did. So he falls behind, on Steve's left, and keeps his pistol at the ready. Their footsteps thunder and echo in the little space as they run, taking a right, a left, another right. Bucky wonders how much time they've got left and pushes harder. He prays that none of the doors swing open and start spilling out Frankenstein's monsters. It sure as hell wouldn't be the first time.

They round another corner, and thank God for Steve Rogers, because there in front of them is the exit door, hanging open. They file through and run breakneck away from the base. Steve puts on the speed and so does Bucky, somehow keeping pace with him. The other guys aren't far behind, on their six as always, and the thick line of

trees grows closer and closer until finally they're out of the clearing and into the forest. The base detonates from the inside. There's a moment of perfect silence, and then a deafening, sudden crackle. One thunderous boom and debris starts to fly. Like a bullet-riddled umbrella Steve raises his shield instinctively to protect their heads. Bucky sees the other Commandos taking cover from the steel and wood raining from the sky. But after a moment, like all things, it stops: Steve lowers the shield and gives Bucky a hand up. The rest of the team, battered but whole, starts picking their way over.

Steve turns to Bucky with confusion on his face. "Buck," he says, "Listen, I found —"

It happens fast. There's a flash of silver, and Bucky sees blood and hears Dernier shout, and before he knows what he's doing he has his gun drawn. A dull reflection in the dim light of the forest catches his eye — goggles — and Bucky spins, firing. The soldier, just a lone one, rushes him. Bucky fires right into his chest, but he's in something bulletproof and won't go down. Bucky keeps squeezing the trigger. It clicks twice before he realizes he's out of ammo, and by then the soldier is on him, and they hit the ground hard enough to knock all the air from Bucky's lungs. They roll in the mud and finally Bucky ends up on top, pinning his legs. The soldier's fists start flying; some of the blows connect. Bucky can hear his grunting noises from behind the mask. He flails and twists and then he's got a solid grasp on Bucky's head. Two gloved thumbs press high into Bucky's cheekbones and he realizes his eyes are about to be gouged out. He whips the soldier across the head with his empty Colt. It's enough pain through the thick helmet, or maybe just enough of a surprise, that the soldier's grip on Bucky's skull loosens. In that split second of opportunity Bucky tears off the mask. He flips his hold on his pistol so that he's got it by the barrel. The man underneath him has a plain and entirely unremarkable face. His eyes go wide before Bucky brings the grip down on him. Bucky hits him again and again. There's a crack and then a sudden give; the soldier's cheek has broken. He makes a strangled and high noise of pain. All the blood means Bucky's hand has gone slick. Bucky hits him until he's sure he won't be getting up again. The man's nose is collapsed, and his eye sockets are misshapen. Finally his face is gone entirely and Bucky can feel blood on his neck. The second he knows the soldier is dead Bucky is on his feet. Not far away the team is hunched down. Bucky runs to them.

"Jesus Christ," he breathes. He knocks Dugan and Falsworth out of the way when he scrambles to kneel down. Morita has his field med kit out and Jones' hand is pushed tight against Steve's neck. Steve's

helmet has been discarded and his head is lolling to the side. His eyelashes flutter, like a drunk's: wide, slitted, wide. It takes Bucky a long moment of staring to understand. There is a knife in Steve's throat. There's that smell, like car parts in the summer. The smell is blood. Steve is bleeding to death under Jones' hands.

"Watch out for others," Bucky barks to the team. Dugan and Falsworth stand, snapped out of their mute terror; Dernier stays, ready to lend a hand. But all Bucky is really aware of is all the blood staining Steve's uniform, visible on Jones' wrist.

"Jesus Christ, Jesus fucking Christ," repeats Bucky. He has no idea what to do with his hands and impotently they flutter near Steve's face. He hopes to God that he's still in there. He doesn't mean to shout but it happens anyway. His voice cracks when it does. "Steve? *Steve!"*

"Shut up; don't draw attention. He's lost a whole lot of blood," Morita says. He's moving quick, digging out a triangular bandage and shoving the fabric at Jones to hold. "We need medical evac."

"Don't you fucking dare." Bucky's voice is cracking and low. He hears it, distantly. "Don't you fucking dare, look at me, you *look at me,* Steve, *Stevie* —"

Jones says, "There's no medical evac this deep in enemy territory."

"I know," Morita says, flinty. "Switch out the bandage for your hand as quick as you can. We need to get him up and moving, back to camp. We got no idea how safe it is here and there isn't a needle or floss in my field kit."

Jones holds his breath and does as he's told. It's a lot of blood. It's a whole lot of blood. Jones' eyes meet Morita's; Jones' eyes are scared. "Jim, there's no goddamn way we can carry him."

Steve's eyes open, just a little. "…happened?"

"Stabbed in the neck, Captain," Morita replies, with a medic's special brand of grim cheer. "Just another Tuesday, huh?"

"Tuesday," Steve mumbles.

"Don't talk," Morita instructs, and then to Jones, "Don't got a choice, do we? Keep the pressure on the wound and we'll get him up slowly. The guys are on our six."

“We can’t act like we got time,” Bucky snaps.

Morita fixes him with a look that’s steely. “Yes,” he says, like his faith is going to carry them right through the forest and hold off every HYDRA soldier in thirty miles besides. “Yes, we can.”

“…Buck?” Steve asks. He tries to move his head to find the source of Bucky’s voice. He hisses abruptly in pain instead and his eyes squeeze shut.

“Quit tryin’ that,” says Bucky hoarsely. He puts his hand on Steve’s face so he’ll have a point of reference. He feels sick and disoriented when he leaves blood from the man he killed in Steve’s flaxen hair. “Shut up, don’t talk; you’re makin’ it worse.”

“Can walk,” Steve slurs, after a second. There’s a frown tugging down his mouth when he tries to sit up. But he does it. Morita looks at Jones, who looks at Dernier, who looks at Bucky.

“Okay,” Bucky says, realizing that none of them are going to say it first, because no one wants to give an order that might end up killing their captain. “Steve? *Hey*, Rogers.”

Steve hums. He smells like gunpowder and blood. This isn’t a back alley, Steve, Bucky thinks, and he hears it in the voice of a boy who’s dead. This isn’t a back alley. This is war.

“Steve, you gotta get up, you big lug,” says Bucky out loud, his voice cracking. “We’ve gotta get up.”

Steve’s brow furrows, but his eyes have shut again. “M’late for class?"

“Yeah, buddy, yeah, you’re late to class,” Bucky agrees, but he’s all cold inside. The fact that Steve is disoriented enough to think it's 1940 should be tipping Bucky over into a whole new wave of panic, but it doesn’t: Steve is bleeding out, and as a result he’s somehow numb to anything else.

Jones and Dernier exchange a look. “Up, get up,” Bucky urges. It’s a battle and a half to get Steve on his knees and then Bucky says, “Jones —“ and together they haul Steve to his feet; Bucky, by some miracle, managing to bear his weight. For a second he sways where he stands and Bucky thinks they’re going to topple over. But Steve is Steve and Steve is stubborn; Steve is miraculous; Steve didn’t die in ’26, or ’34, or ’38, and he’s not going to die now. Steve isn’t going to die now.

“Remember walking?” Bucky asks.

Steve mumbles incoherently before he manages, with a real amount of vehemence for someone bleeding so heavily: “…M’no…idiot, Barnes.”

A laugh launches out of Bucky’s throat. “Coulda fooled me.”

“Come on, Cap, just a few steps,” Morita says. Steve and Bucky and Jones, in some especially bloody five-legged race, manage to start walking. Bucky yells out a command. It doesn’t matter what it is. He doesn’t remember. He digs his fingers into Steve’s ribs. They move slowly in a formation that reminds Bucky of penguins he read about once in school, all huddled around the smallest and weakest in the dead of winter to keep them warm. This, at least, Bucky is used to. He’s good at keeping Steve warm. He repeats this to himself. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s keeping Steve warm.

“Keep him conscious,” Morita directs, and then, “Thank fuck we didn’t settle down fifteen miles away.”

Bucky wracks his brain. He can’t think of anything past the white noise of terror, and so he decides instead to do what he does best: he starts telling a story. “Hey, Steve. Remember that cake your ma used to make? What was it called?”

Their pace is painfully slow; inside Bucky’s spine is a terrified itch that is telling him to grab Steve and run. Instead he watches their feet as they stumble. Steve’s knees keep giving out on him. “Apple,” Steve responds, after a second. He’s breathing heavy and Bucky instinctively listens for a rattle or wheeze. At least there isn’t one.

“Yeah, apple,” Bucky agrees. “And remember when the war hit, and we couldn’t afford apples, and one day I stole a couple from Mazzello’s and you caught me and made me walk all the way back and wash his dishes for a week?”

Steve makes an affirmative sound. From his left Jones attempts a smile. “This story got a point, Sarge?”

“Sure thing,” Bucky replies. “The point is — Stevie, you listening? The point is, Steve’s a goddamn terrible cook; burns boiling water. But he better not plan on bleeding out, because he’s the only person alive who knows his ma’s secret ingredient, and I ain’t dying without having tasted that cake one last time.”

Steve huffs what might be a laugh. And thank God — Bucky wants to

fall to his knees and cry — there's one of their tents, finally visible, mercifully undiscovered by the enemy. They must get settled; Bucky isn't too aware of it. He tries to keep Steve's eyes open. He says his name again and again. He murmurs things. Look at me. Look at me. Steve, we're fine.

"Good news is, it probably won't get infected," Morita is saying, digging one-handed in his kit. There's a wry tilt to his mouth. "You know what would be real goddamn helpful, though? If anyone had bothered to tell me exactly what it was the Army juiced him up with."

None of the Commandos talk about it — none of them, technically, are supposed to know at all — but there's no room for lying when Steve's still bleeding under Morita's hand.

"Know about as much as you do," Bucky confesses. "He's fast. Strong. Has a way of healing quick. That's all I've got."

Morita looks like he figured as much. "Thread me a needle," he instructs. With Steve propped precariously up on him Bucky does as he's told and hands it over. Morita's mouth goes tight. "It's gonna bleed like hell, Sarge," he warns. "But I'm gonna work fast. Hold his head. Keep him still."

"Sorry, I'm sorry," Bucky says quietly to Steve. He makes a little sound. "Stevie," Bucky says, even though he doesn't mean to. His throat is tight, and his vision is blurring. He blinks hard. It hurts so bad. Don't do that, he wants to say. He wants to say: you're breaking my heart. Steve smells like sweat and fear. It's a unique war-smell. He's so pale, and Bucky is so afraid. Morita unscrews a little bottle of iodine with his teeth and balances it on the ground, dipping the needle into it. Bucky tips Steve's head against his shoulder and he makes another noise. Bucky tightens his hand and just like that Morita steels himself, removes the bandage, and starts in.

He didn't lie: there is a lot of blood. Bucky can't stop looking. "You're alright," he says to Steve, though he doesn't really hear himself. "You're alright." Bucky has no idea how Morita can even see the wound, but sure enough he's holding the skin together in one hand and sewing it up with the other. He has to stop and tie a knot one-handed after each stitch. It's messy and it's ugly. Steve's hands clench into fists, and five of his fingers dig in to Bucky's thigh. Bucky sees sweat on his brow. Bucky isn't even sure what he's saying. "Sorry, almost done — he's almost done, Steve, huh? Not so bad, he's almost

done." Don't leave; don't leave. I'd do anything to make you stay. He talks about other things. About everything and nothing. He tells stories and cracks pale and unfunny jokes. It reminds him of city winters, and Steve laid up sick in bed, and lighting candles at church. Steve's blunt nails tear through Bucky's pants and draw five pinpricks of blood in his leg, and the mud is cold beneath them. "I got you; I got you," Bucky repeats, and again, "I got you, m'here, nothin' bad's gonna happen, not while I'm here," and he presses his nose into Steve's hair.

And sure enough, it's over. Bucky doesn't realize how hard his heart was pounding until the second that Morita ties off the last suture and reaches for the iodine again. He pours it over the wound and it washes away most of the blood, and Steve makes a terrible noise while he does it, his legs twitching. But he's alive. The word pounds through Bucky with his blood. He knows his eyes are still huge and panicked in his face, and he's aware that he's shaking all over, very finely. Alive, alive, alive. Morita reaches up and checks Steve's pulse, and after a moment of listening his eyes find Bucky's, and he nods.

—

You scare the hell out of me. Every hour of every God damn day. You scare me to fucking death.

I have a theory, a theory about war, and it works like this — all of us, whether we enlisted or hit the lottery, we tell ourselves stories about why we're out here. Some guys who get the draft say it's God's plan for them, and some guys who enlist say they're doin it for Uncle Sam or their sweethearts or their mamas, or maybe even their shellshocked daddies.

I didn't come to war for you and I didn't fight to keep it away. The way I got out here was cowardly. But the more I fought the more I told myself my story. It's so much easier when you're telling yourself a story. Because the truth is that we're not here for God or for our nation or even for our families or our sweethearts. Maybe we think so at first or we convince ourselves afterwards, which is easy enough to do when you're humping through the muck or trying not to catch hypothermia in the forest. In the field it's a different story. Suddenly all the pretty pictures you've painted fade away and all that's left is the ugly gore and the sweat. It turns out that there's not one God damn thing that's glorious about death. You're not out here for them. You're out here because that's just the way the chips fell.

I told you, you heard me: I told you never to follow me into Hell. Now I'm

not vain enough to think that's why you're out here now — if there's any person in what's left of this God forsaken planet who's part of a bigger picture, it'd be you. But I'll keep saying it until it sticks. You got nothing to prove. I'm not worth much, I damn well know that, but I'll ask you anyway: Stay for me. If you leave me alone in this world I'll turn into something terrible. I'll turn into the nasty creature that's growing inside me. This war, it'll swallow me whole.

—

By the time Steve is back on his feet they've evacuated to base. He acts fine but he sleeps for hours and hours at a time. Bucky remembers that, from before. Steve was always tired. And Bucky would let himself in after work with the key under the rock, and on the stove their paltry dinner would be burning, and there was Steve, always Steve: passed out on the couch, his face stuffed into the ratty cushions, his skinny toes sticking out from underneath the blanket. He was perennially confusing Bucky's sweaters with his own, God knows how, and he would wear it, the green one, the one that slipped off his shoulder, when he got too cold. He fell asleep in that one a lot. And Bucky would toe his shoes off, and take the broth off the stove…

"It's good," Morita tells him, picking at his beans. The mess hall is mostly empty, and Steve has been in bed already for an hour. "Sleep helps the body heal. The more he sleeps the better he'll get."

"Anyone else would've been dead in two minutes flat," Bucky says, on edge.

Morita heaves a sigh. "You're not wrong," he replies.

Bucky is ravenous nearly all the time — he has been since Austria — and he forces himself to eat because he has to, not because he wants it. At least the silence is too exhausted to be uncomfortable. Belatedly Bucky realizes that he's never actually been alone with Morita before. Bucky knows two things about Jim Morita: he lived in Fresno, and he hoards his D-rations not for emergencies but instead for days when morale is low. Bucky wants badly to start a conversation, but for the maybe first time in his life he doesn't know how. He could ask about what growing up out on the west coast was like, if palm trees really are as big as they look in the pictures — if he put up with a lot of shit in his neighborhood; how much worse it must have been for him after Pearl Harbor. And maybe once Bucky could have started that conversation, and he could have turned on a smile and drawn the real Jim out; he even thinks of the joke he would open with, something

about their shared first name. But now he has no idea how to do that, or how to be that person. So instead Bucky eats his food in silence.

“You really took that motherfucker down,” Morita says, after a second. Bucky looks up, confused. There’s a strange and wary smile at the corner of Morita’s mouth. “Don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so angry.”

Bucky flounders but keeps his expression blank, unsure of how to answer. Morita doesn’t seem to be the kind to gloat about killing Nazis, and there is something more in his sure gaze than victory. In fact there isn’t a hint of victory at all.

After a pause Morita sighs and shifts and finally he says, “I don’t want you to take this at all the wrong way, and God knows you’ve got the right to hit me silly if you do — but are you alright, Sarge?”

“Do I not seem alright?” Then Bucky remembers that he’s trying to get to know this guy better. He thinks of what he would have done before, and forcibly he lowers his hackles. “Because I’m doin’ fine, Morita. Good as anyone else, which is to say that I’m —“

“Tired as hell, cold as balls?”

Bucky is surprised enough that he grins. “Something like that.”

“Well, we’ve got at least a week of R&R, if the rumor’s right. Guess Phillips will tell us tomorrow either way.”

Bucky hasn’t heard anything about that, and truthfully it didn’t even cross his mind once while he generally made a nuisance of himself in medical. He knows that when he’s down there, staring over Steve and halfheartedly flirting with the nurses, that he’s more hindrance than help. But he doesn’t know how to stop himself from doing it. He doesn’t know how to stop himself from doing a lot of things these days.

Morita is continuing on their conversation deftly even though Bucky is probably brooding so loudly they can hear it in munitions. “Speaking of Phillips, I should probably go see if I can talk to him before lights out.”

“Why’s that?” asks Bucky.

“Having to carry Cap all the way back to our camp while he was bleeding like that isn’t something that we can afford to do again. I’m

putting in a request for a more complete field med kit, for us and other commando units. I understand not needing a needle or floss in the trenches, but out here, on the kind of ops we take, we don't always have the luxury of a nearby med wing. Like you said, if any one of us would have taken that wound, we would've been dead in minutes."

"That's smart," says Bucky, and means it. He thinks of Steve raising hell just to allow Morita and Jones to fight with them, and suddenly he's worried. "You, uh — you gonna go alone?"

Morita seems to study him for a second. And then he says, quietly enough that Bucky feels the immense weight of his trust: "I wouldn't usually, you understand? But it was life or death out there. And I think that…" He frowns, unwilling to finish, but Bucky understands it now. Because it's about Steve, who's doubtlessly the only really invaluable one on their team, Morita is hoping that the brass will overlook the fact that he's Japanese in heritage and fighting side-by-side with white guys, sort of illegally, because they can't afford to lose Captain America.

Morita's going to have to play it really well, Bucky thinks, so that he doesn't come off like he's saying that the Army itself fucked up. Not even Steve's pigheaded insistence could keep them from booting Morita out then.

"Look, let me talk to him," Bucky offers. "I'll let him know what happened in the field. Hell, they've been getting on my ass to submit a report anyway; I'll just bring it up then."

Morita looks totally dumbstruck. "Sarge —"

"I wouldn't offer if I didn't wanna," Bucky says. "You're a damn good soldier, Morita. Steve wouldn't want to risk you over a med kit, and for that matter I don't want to, either."

"Shit," Morita says. He grins. "Well, damn. Alright. I can't turn that down. Thanks, Sergeant Barnes. Really."

Bucky nods. They shake on it. "Is Dugan giving you shit?" he asks, before he can talk himself out of it.

"Dugan's on the level."

Bucky takes that for what it is, and then says, "You did —" and it takes him by surprise. He has to gather himself before he finishes. He

clears his throat and lets go of Morita's hand. He feels like he's spoken out of turn. "You did good."

Morita shrugs. "Don't say that," he says. "It was touch and go. Field medicine's more of an art than a science. Half luck, half accident. Anyone else —"

"Bullshit," says Bucky, quiet and purposeful. "Thank you."

Their eyes meet. "You're welcome," Jim Morita tells him.

—

A full luxurious week of leave in London is the reward they get for almost getting Steve killed in the field. They're in the city all of two hours, setting up shop in the rickety brown apartment complex that has been appropriated for the war effort, when Bucky finally gets some good news. Naturally he uses this opportunity to climb the fire escape just like old times, and sneaks in through Steve's window.

Steve doesn't hear Bucky come in.

"Hey, trouble," he says, and Steve jumps about thirty feet at the desk and slams his sketchbook shut. Bucky starts cackling, and Steve looks ready to throw the table at him. "Shit, Stevie, I'm sorry," he says. "What you got in there, huh? Naked ladies?" He makes like he's going to grab for it and Steve scowls.

"Drawn worse," he says. "You sat in on that figures class. And — God, what, three years ago, when —"

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

Steve laughs, remembering. "That was a lot of money. I think that was the most money I've ever made."

"And you only had to draw a bunch of girls in their underthings, I know, what a burden that must have been."

"The ankle ain't right," Steve says, in the discerning voice of his employer, a man who Bucky never met but was suspicious of for the entire duration of Steve's employment. "It's gotta be —"

"*Re-e-e-a-l* slim," Bucky chimes in, and it makes Steve laugh. "God damn, that guy. Creepy as hell."

"What are you doin'?" Steve asks. "Why aren't you getting settled into

your room?"

"Pal, I own one duffle bag and a pair of shoes, and those I'm wearing," Bucky says. He leans a hip against the old desk and then he procures the pamphlet he snatched from the reception bulletin board today. He waves it in front of Steve. "Look. Thought we could relive your chorus girl glory days."

Steve squints while he reads it, muscle memory, and then rolls his eyes. "Don't you got a report to write?"

"Finished it."

"Buck —"

"You don't even have an excuse," Bucky says. "We're on leave, you're itching to get out, and girls will be falling all over themselves to get you on the dance floor. C'mon."

"A big dance hall filled up with a million people, with no air, and Dugan sneaking in alcohol? Bucky, I'm sorry; it just doesn't sound like my idea of a good time."

Bucky sighs. "This is the first and maybe the only leave we'll ever get. I can't let you pass up the opportunity, Steve. That's just sad. We'll dance with the girls. It'll be *fun.*"

That frown is between Steve's eyebrows and he says, uncomfortably, "Bucky, I don't know about dancing with girls. I'm…you know, I don't want to…do anything that might, might not be right."

It takes Bucky a second, but he puts it together fast. "Agent Carter," he realizes.

Steve is red. "That's not what I'm saying," he tries; but it is what he's saying, and he can never lie to Bucky anyway.

Oh, Christ, thinks Bucky. Here it is. He knew he'd have to make this speech eventually. Aw, Steve, he's supposed to say. She'll say yes. She'd say yes if you asked right now. She'd marry you if you proposed with a ring from a Cracker Jack box. She's your forever girl, Steve, Bucky tries to get out. She's your forever girl. But it turns to ash in his throat and after working his mouth uselessly for a second he finally snaps it shut. Steve doesn't notice. He's frowning, and looking down at the table. Something else is on his mind.

“I don’t think she’d mind,” Bucky finally manages, hugely inadequate.

Steve looks at him. “Buck,” he says. “There was something —“

“What?” Bucky asks.

“At the base,” Steve replies. Bucky remembers now how Steve turned to him, just before he was hit, and how he was going to say something, but then it was impossible. Steve is still looking at him. “I saw — there was this document, I guess it —“ and then he shakes his head. “You know, it’s nothing. It’s probably nothing.”

“What was it? Hell, now you *have* to tell me; I’m curious,” Bucky says.

Steve shakes his head. “Nah,” he says. “Never mind me. I probably saw it wrong anyway.”

Bucky decides to let it go. He shoves at Steve’s shoulder. “Listen,” he says, “It’s a *dance,* not a wedding ring. Besides, none of the USO girls are like that. They’re all very proper, hand-picked from church congregations. You’ll see. And look, I’ll be good: I won’t even make you get out there. All you gotta do is tag along and drink some punch and sulk along the wall.”

Steve frowns mightily. “I won’t sulk,” he complains. “I *don’t* sulk.”

“Sure,” Bucky agrees. He ruffles Steve’s hair and Steve bats back ineffectively. “About as sweet as vinegar, you are. And so *dramatic*. Jesus. You auditioning for Broadway, sunshine?”

“Lord’s name,” Steve admonishes, just to be contrary, and finally smacks his hand away. He heaves a sigh. “Fine. *Fine*, I’ll come.”

“Now, was that so hard? You better be ready by 1700 sharp, Cap.”

“You want to know?” asks Steve suddenly.

“Know what?”

“Ma’s ingredient. In the cake.”

Bucky can’t believe Steve remembers that. He was in and out of consciousness for that whole day. Bucky looks at him for a long minute, and then he decides, quietly: “No way, Steve. Hold onto it for me, until after the war.”

—

The USO gig is — and Steve is smug about this — positively terrible. All the other soldiers are either hostile or greenly starstruck, and Steve has to put on that godawful fake voice he uses. But the unit only has to endure for half an hour, because then Bucky meets a beautiful girl named Laurie. She wears bright red lipstick and has her nails painted to match, and when she offers to show them the real nightlife in London Dugan almost trips over himself saying yes, so it's a yes, and finally they spill out of the stuffy dance hall and into the muggy night.

The pub they all end up in is packed and sweaty and downtrodden. The sticky floorboards creak, and it smells like spilled beer. The band is so loud that Bucky feels the beat vibrating in his chest, and he belatedly realizes he hasn't heard music like this, real music, hot jazz, in two years now at least. Bucky loves it, immediately. So he turns to Laurie with her pretty blue skirt and her curled pale hair, and asks, "May I?"

"We do it a little differently here," Laurie says to him. Bucky's heart is six sizes too big because of the music and the laughter and all the cigarette smoke. He winks at her.

Unsurprisingly Bucky catches on fast, and from there, they're off: Laurie knows how to Lindy, and she knows how to do a lot of other things, too. She's good — she's amazing. Bucky takes off his jacket and loses his hat. He snaps off his suspenders and loosens his tie. The music is fast. Her smile is bright, and she yelps and laughs when he swings her over his shoulder. She never misses a beat. They raise the dust on the floorboards.

Bucky doesn't know how long it lasts, and he doesn't care. Finally a slow song comes on, and Laurie's hair is slipping a little from its two victory rolls, and her fingers are slim and strong on his shoulders.

"Buy me a drink," she says to him, "I have gentleman admirers to tend to." And she does — when she pulls out a cigarette three men scramble over themselves to get her a light.

"Whiskey?" Bucky asks, over her laughter.

"Please," she says.

The Commandos, true to their name, raise a howling ruckus when Bucky passes by their table on his way back from the bar.

“Man,” Jones laughs, “I had no idea you could dance that way, Sarge.”

“I’m still offended you’re the only one who managed to snag a USO girl,” Falsworth says. “I’m a *native*, Barnes, for God’s sake.”

“Bucky could charm Mussolini into signing a peace treaty,” says Steve, and the guys roar with laughter. Bucky slaps him on the back, and squeezes his shoulder. He studies him for a second, and Steve gives him a shove. He’s smiling. He wants Bucky to have a good time. That’s always enough for Bucky, and so he leaves to find Laurie again.

“For the lady,” he says, presenting her drink. She smiles up at him, and her nose wrinkles when she does. She gives him the rest of her cigarette, and it thrills him to put his mouth where her lipstick stains are.

By last call Steve is gone, and the other boys have found themselves girls or friends or other places for the night. The band strikes up their final sad tune. The piano is meandering and pretty and the trumpets are soft. *In all the old familiar places*, their singer hums. *I’ll be seeing you; I’ll be seeing you…I’ll be looking at the moon, but I’ll be seeing…*

“Shall we?” Laurie asks, and he says yes; he wants to walk her home, and this song is too sad to dance to.

It’s lucky Bucky is with a local: London is in a blackout. The city hopes to be quiet and unassuming at night, and very still, and it holds its breath — that way, the Luftwaffe might not see it. It reminds Bucky of hide and seek with Becca when they were little. There isn’t a single light on the street other than the moon and the occasional car. A steady drizzle falls around them. Bucky wants to offer Laurie his jacket, but she has her own.

“I hope you didn’t want that dance,” Laurie says, her small hand tucked into the crook of his arm again, companionably. She scuffs her feet while she says this. “I don’t like sad songs, is all.”

“Who does?”

“Some people,” Laurie says. “Don’t you know anyone who likes sad songs?”

“Yeah,” Bucky admits, because Steve does. Artist type.

Laurie kisses him brashly outside of her building. Her lipstick tastes

waxy and gets all over his mouth. He hasn't kissed a girl in a while. He can't remember the last time he kissed anyone. And so he presses her against the cold brick wall, and he kisses her again and again. Finally he pulls away. Her lipstick is smudged and gone in places. Her eyes are big and brown. Bucky loops his index finger in one of her flyaway yellow curls and gives it a tug. It makes her smile and he kisses her again before letting up.

"You'll forgive me for not inviting you in," Laurie says, hushed, but she still has a curious smile tilting her mouth. She's sad around the eyes, the same way everyone is now. Up close her mascara seems singed and ashy, just like the rest of her city. "I don't like getting attached to soldiers, you understand. The turnover rate for your profession is rather high."

"Hey, don't apologize," Bucky replies, and his voice is quiet, too. "It's true, we drop like flies. I wasn't even really thinking about it, anyhow. It was nice just to dance."

Laurie keeps smiling her little smile at him, wistful. "You know what's funny, Sarge? I don't even think you're lying. Besides, you must have a sweetheart at a home. I wouldn't want to make her jealous."

Bucky shrugs. "Nope. But how do I know you don't got someone too? Dame like you."

"Like I said," Laurie replies, "The turnover rate for your profession is high."

Before Bucky can stumble his way through a response to that, she reaches up then and brushes her fingers high on his cheekbone. "I was rather expecting the mask," she says.

"What?"

"You know, in the comic books." Laurie's red fingers still rest feather-light on his face. They're cold. "We have them here, too. Bucky Barnes, Captain America's right-hand man. You have a mask on in them."

Bucky had no idea. "Sounds like it would make seeing the enemy out of my scope kind of difficult, if you don't mind me saying."

"Do you know what I do now, for a living?" asks Laurie. "I spend all day in the factory: I make bombs. It's not as though I don't know what you're out there using them for."

She kisses him again, this time on the cheek. “I had a good night, Sergeant Barnes,” she tells him. “I do like you. It’s good you don’t wear the mask. You have beautiful eyes. You have the eyes of an honest man.” Bucky is enthralled. His throat is closing up. She’s so beautiful, and so sad; Bucky doesn’t even know her last name, and he will never see her again.

“James Barnes,” Laurie says, in a whisper, and her smile is still at the corner of her mouth. “Don’t lie this time. Your eyes give you away. Who were you dancing with tonight? Do you miss her very much?”

“I miss her all the time,” Bucky confesses, though he can barely speak. “What about him?”

“Your chin is the same.”

Bucky kisses her, hard and sudden and viciously hungry, and she bites his lip when he pulls away. They look at each other. “Goodnight, James,” Laurie tells him.

“Goodnight, Laurie,” Bucky says.

She gives him one last pretty smile and then her blue skirt swishes and then she’s gone, into the door, and Bucky is left standing out in the drizzle with empty hands. He loiters for a second, wishing for a smoke, but finally just stuffs his hands in his coat pockets and starts to wander. He doesn’t know where he is, but he paid attention on the the walk over here, and so he figures he’ll find his way back eventually. Despite all that he drank he isn’t feeling a buzz. He chalks it up to how cold the air is.

After a while of walking Bucky finds that he misses the weight of his rifle and his pack now that he isn’t dancing. The steady light rain begins to slide down the back of his collar. This city is nothing like his own; it’s too quiet, for one, and for another the buildings are tall but not quite tall enough, and they’re so old, with big intricate carvings all over them. But if he concentrates hard it smells almost the same, and he likes that about it; he likes that about it just fine.

—

If I close my eyes I can pretend I’m back home, except there’s maybe not so many horns honking. It’s better than being on the front, though. Hell of a lot better than that.

Remember on the real hot days when we used to dangle our legs off the

dock? At around four o'clock the hot dog stand shaded us until sundown. I was peeled and blistered and burned from working all day out in the sun anyway, but I didn't want to go to the apartment because it wasn't often you'd get out. You were always so careful when you brought your sketchbook for drawing, making sure not to drop it in, but everything you drew those days ended up getting sprayed a little by the waves anyway. There must be a million drawings of me and the landscape there that's smudged in tiny circles the shape of the water droplets.

I remember one year, when we first got a place, the kid in the apartment below us — really just a kid — he died in the night from the fever that was taking everyone in the neighborhood. And you were so damn upset, all hunched over, red around the eyes. I slung my arm around you and said a bunch of bullshit nonsense about how it was fine and at least he didn't hurt anymore. But then I put my face in your hair and thanked God it was him and not you. I thought, if He had to take someone, at least it wasn't you. It was the worst thing I ever thought but it's true.

Tell you a secret? One month out a guy got hurt bad in a shelling. Reminded me of that sick kid downstairs, the same hair, you remember — curly? Just like then there wasn't nothing I could have done to help him. His belly looked like Swiss cheese from all the shrapnel. Fell down next to me. There was no saving him, and he was staring right at me — it's not like I could leave him there, not when he was looking like that. He said please, and so I shot him in the face. I was glad when he was done wheezing and gasping. I was so damn glad: I didn't have to listen to it anymore. So maybe that's the worst thing I ever thought, now that I remember it.

Water's different here. It mists off the Thames, and by night I half expect the air to freeze while I try to walk through it. There's no way I'd dip my feet in, or want you to. And what's there to draw? Can't even see Big Ben or any of that from where we are. Everything's so gray, I miss the big red burns I'd get that made me have to sleep on my belly for weeks on end. I don't think you could ever really stay out long enough to get a burn that way but I remember that your nose would get it bad and turn all red and peel a little on the bridge of it. I thought that was funny as hell. Sweet. I don't know why, but it was. Bet you don't even burn now. That's a good thing, I keep telling myself. In this world of bad things that's one really good thing.

—

"Intel tells us that there's a base in Poland," Commander Rogers says. "We know you know where it is. Hey. You speak English? Do you

speak any English? Jones, ask him if —“

“*Fuck*,” Bucky interrupts, and in a second flat he’s looming over the agent. The man is bound hands and feet to a wooden chair. “Open your mouth,” Bucky says. The man’s eyes are wide and angry, and he’s clenching his jaw closed tight. “Open your fucking mouth!” Bucky draws his Colt and shoots the operative in the foot. He keens in pain, a terrible sound, and his mouth widens just enough that Bucky can wedge a finger inside and pop out the little cyanide capsule. He flicks it away.

“Goddammit,” Bucky mumbles, and steps back again. “You gotta watch ‘em, huh?”

He gets no reply from the company and so he bends down and props his hands on his knees. He waits until the Nazi is looking him in the eye. “Hey, motherfucker,” Bucky says, kindly enough. “You speak any English? Nein? Look, I got a bullet for your other foot, too.”

“Yes,” the Kraut spits. His eyes are popped with fury, and he’s sweating bullets from the pain.

Bucky smiles at him so wide he feels his eyes crinkle. He claps the guy on the shoulder. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Now it’s like this. I don’t wanna hurt you. I really don’t. It’s been a long day. But you fucked with my team, and you fucked with me, and then you made a big mistake: you fucked with my Captain. So my hands are just tied, sweetheart. Now you owe me something. You understand? I can be real hospitable. But you’re gonna spill your guts, one way or another.”

“Sergeant,” Cap says. When Bucky turns he pulls his knife. Habitually he flips it around in his hand, twirling it with his fingers; a tic.

“You got this?” Steve asks.

Bucky shrugs, and he says, “Fifteen minutes. You boys take a walk.”

It makes a mess, but Bucky has the intel in ten.

—

You remember staying up late reading Dracula out loud to each other under the covers, back when your ma was still alive? And we were havin the best time, scaring ourselves like a couple of idiots, until all of a sudden a police siren started up outside and we both screamed fit to wake the

people in West Virginia. Then your ma came flying down the hall with a bread knife of all things at the ready, and she made us turn out the lights. So we did, and then of course I tried to act all tough, but I slept next to you that night anyway. Funny, I guess. Turns out that you're still my favorite hiding place. Funny, too: turns out there are scarier things in the dark than vampires.

Tell you something. Tell you another secret, because this one, this one I won't ever tell, not to God, not to a priest, and sure as hell not to you. In that base we burned the bodies in a furnace. I hadn't eaten in days. The truth is simple. The smell made me hungry.

—

The New York Times Best Seller List
December 21, 1975
Non-Fiction

This Week

1 THE LETTERS: UNCUT, by Ashley Jonathan, PhD. (Paradigm, $9.95.) Professor Jonathan makes history by compiling the letters of Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes in their original uncensored form for the first time since their unauthorized leak in 1966.

2 THE RELAXATION RESPONSE, by Herbert Benson, M.D. (William Morrow, $5.95.) Non-TM meditation technique to relive tension.

—

iloved-youfirst

> so obviously i loved unrequited, fourth time i've seen it, cried like a baby, etc, but when we came out my mom was totally confused about that scene in the middle, you know, *that scene*, and basically there was this painfully awkward moment where i explained to her that, yeah, that actually was in one of them. like, how did she not know this? *everybody knows about that letter.*

lollyps:

Is your mom between the ages of maybe forty-five and sixty? Because if so, she probably didn't know that one existed, considering it was literally almost impossible to get a hold of the letters between 1966 and 1975. The second that they were released Howard Stark sued the NYT for so much money — yeah, still undisclosed — that they almost went bankrupt. Don't learn that one about him in school, do you? Besides the billion and one anti-disclosure agreements he probably made every single one of his employees sign, there was also a huge uproar among the American public, particularly inside the military, and soon enough that shit was almost completely shut down. So basically a whole generation didn't get to read/study the letters the way that people from 1975 on have, because there were only about 300,000 copies distributed in that one day, and after that, the printing of those letters was stopped entirely. Even when copies started to slip out in the late '60's/early '70's, most of them were paraphrased and/or censored beyond recognition. (He says "fuck", like, twenty-some times, idk. Not exactly good for our Puritanical values.)

TL;DR, for years, Barnes' letters were really, incredibly rare. In fact, they're one of the most heavily censored and widely banned works of literature in history. And also, *that* letter? I mean, by modern standards, and before Joe Wright worked his magic in Unrequited…it doesn't seem too explicit or anything, right? But in 1966 that was probably the most heavily censored of them all.

—

There's this feeling I get after a firefight, when the shells are still bouncing across the ground, and I'm still a little blind and deaf, but the whole world is crystal clear, and I could just fall to the ground and cry like a baby because I'm still alive. The first time I felt it I thought I was going to burst out of my skin. And then everything rushed back so quick I felt like a newborn. The whole world was brand-new and I was on top of it. I could swallow it whole.

You think I haven't seen the same look on your face?

The closest I've ever been to the Garden of Eden is the genesis on the battlefield when the shrapnel's still falling like hail on a tin roof. You look at me with those blue eyes all hot and electric in your face, blood on your cheek, soot smudged over your nose. Bone of my bones. Were you taken

from my rib? You must have been, or maybe I was made from yours. And God damn, I want it. I want back inside you. I want you now, same as I wanted you before, prettier than hell even with a bloodied nose and split knuckles. Don't care you were smaller. Liked it, even — same as I like you this way too. You make me hungry. You understand? You make me hungry. That mouth pink like spun sugar, though it doesn't stop you from talking fit to cut anyone down to bits with your angry words. A spitfire since you learned how to speak, and I'll tell you something, it's hell to love a fighter.

Anyway, Jesus — I shouldn't even be thinking it, much less writing it down. I used to love you so sweet, the way kids love, the way I was supposed to. Then it turned greedy and true. If there's any Heaven that's fit for me it'd be all your pale skin under my hands for the rest of eternity. I wouldn't need anything else. Not food or drink or sleep. Just my hands on you and your sweet love-sounds.

I think it's fit I take it to the grave. Wouldn't make you any happier. In fact it'd do nothing but put you in danger — that ain't something I want. It's another story I tell myself, I guess. That I'm being noble and doing it for you, when really I'm just being scared, and can't do it to myself.

—

"You're terrible at this."

"You want a picture, just ask my ma, there's one of me all done up in dress —"

"I don't want you like that," Steve says, and frowns down at his tiny battered sketchbook. "Quit fidgeting."

"You quit," Bucky mumbles, reflexively. But he tries. He goes back to working on his knives — he likes two in each boot, now, and one inside his jacket — cleaning and rearranging. Cleaning the cache is just the same anymore as the way he used to shower and shave and take his socks off before bed. He's collected these knives from dead Nazis, and so a lot of them have swastikas scraped off. He has a lighter, too, from a HYDRA operative, and their gory symbol is carved on the top. Bucky's been working on scratching off the tentacles attached to the skull, but one of them is stubborn, and it won't be removed. He likes to carve things in where the Kraut's symbols used to be. Dugan still has Bucky's second liberated masterpiece from '43: a Nazi trench knife. BURY ME FACE DOWN, says one side of the handle, and the other side reads, SO THE WHOLE WORLD CAN KISS MY ASS.

Outside their tent the forest is quiet and the fire burns low. The boys talk. Sometimes Steve mumbles an obscenity when he messes up, *motherfucker*, and Bucky likes the familiar sound of the word. Bucky loses himself in disassembling and cleaning and reassembling his Colt. He thinks of each step in the process as he performs it. His mind goes quiet the same way it would when he spent a summer working with his hands at the factory across town. Like hand-to-hand, or shooting, or sex, there's a ritual here; the ritual lulls him. The oil is slick like blood, or even a girl. Few things in life are honest like those things are.

"I got that song in my head," Steve says, after a second. "You know…" and he hums the tune, terribly, endearingly off-key.

"That ain't it," Bucky laughs. "It goes, *nobody knows the trouble I've seen…*"

"Yeah," Steve murmurs, "That's the one."

But now it's in Bucky's head too, and as he works he croons soft: "*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, glory hallelujah…If you get there before I do, oh yes Lord, tell all my friends I'm comin' too…*" And he meanders his way through the whole song, hearing Louis' big band in his head while he does:

Although you see me

Goin' on so, oh yes,

I have my trials here below,

Oh yes, Lord…

"Shoulda been in the pictures," says Steve, tilting a smile. He's always liked Bucky's voice.

"Well I am a handsome devil."

"Hmm."

Falsworth sticks his head through the flap of the tent and Steve and Bucky jump. Falsworth looks between them. Steve isn't guilty because he doesn't have anything to be guilty about, but Bucky is terrified, and the fear closes tight around his throat. He doesn't like people sneaking up, not even Monty — who isn't even "people" but instead like a brother. He feels like he's been caught doing something terrible.

“What do you want?” Bucky asks, too sharply.

“Jones received orders for marching from base. Thought you ought to know.”

“Thank you,” says Steve, in that authoritative way he’s adopted, devoid of his usual emotion. It’s his stage voice, and Bucky doesn’t like hearing it, not when it’s only the two of them. “We’ll be right out.”

Falsworth lingers. “I didn’t know you were an artist, Captain,” is what he finally says.

Steve turns a little red over his nose and shrugs. “Yeah. Went to school for it for a while. But, well, bills; you know. We tried, but in the end it was only for a couple courses.”

Falsworth is thoughtful. Outside Dugan barks out that distinctive laugh and Bucky almost flinches. “It’s an astounding likeness.”

“Thanks,” says Steve, offering up a smile.

Falsworth goes out and his footsteps crunch and fade and his voice rejoins the conversation. Steve doesn’t seem to be in a hurry to check up on the Colonel’s orders. Bucky doesn’t question it because he doesn’t mind; instead he starts a cigarette with his liberated lighter and begins to clean his rifle. After a while he feels eyes on him, and looks up. “Hmm?” he asks.

“You know where I want to go?” says Steve.

“Where’s that?”

“Central.”

“Been a while, huh.”

“Yeah,” Steve sighs. “Sit in the park and draw. That’s what I want to do. Eat a hot dog. Visit your sister in Hoboken.”

Bucky is immediately disgusted and almost chokes on his inhale at the pure horror. “We ain’t going to Jersey. Not even Becca can get me out to Jersey.” Not even *Steve* could get him out to Jersey.

Steve smiles at the corner of his mouth, which means his mind is a million miles away again. Bucky doesn’t mind. He takes a long drag and starts to pack his weapons away, methodically. Steve is thinking

about going back home. It's something he wants to do. That's a good thing.

"Truth is you couldn't pay me money to go back to Hoboken," Steve says, picking up their conversation again. Bucky looks up to see him chewing at his stub of a pencil for a minute. He knows that this is true: Steve is a Fulton Landing boy through and through, and the thought of him living anywhere but their worn slice of Brooklyn is unimaginable. The horns honking, and the murky city air, and the godawful smell of the neighbors cooking — the socialists, the artist types: Steve belongs there at dusk, with his pale feet hanging off the fire escape. Bucky looks at Steve and misses home, but only partway. Steve is in front of him, after all. He can't miss home that much. Most of home is right here.

"I shouldn't say it," Steve says, stretching, and cracking his knuckles. He's finished sketching, and Bucky is finished with his knives and guns. "But gosh, I miss bar fights. Remember that place —"

"*Jesus*, no; I'm trying to forget," Bucky groans.

Steve grins. "It was a good bar."

"Thought you were gonna go blind and deaf, way you were bleeding."

"A good fuckin' bar," Steve insists.

"Sure," Bucky agrees. "Yeah, tell that to your nose. You should try breakin' it for a third time, maybe Morita can set it straight, finally —"

Steve kicks at him. Bucky blows smoke in his face. Then Steve sighs. "Let's go out. See where Phillips wants us next."

Bucky is so full of questions for Steve these days. He likes this, Bucky knows — he likes the fight, and the rush, and he likes doing what's right, and he likes helping, and he likes leading the team. But he also doesn't like it. Captain America isn't Steve: Captain America is someone with a very steady and commanding voice, and someone who avoids alleyway fights, and probably someone cornfed, with eyes like the Kansas sky, and raised in Kansas, too — or one of those other miserable places that Bucky doesn't know the name of. It hits him, sometimes: If he wasn't here there wouldn't be a single person on Earth who understood Steve. Not even Carter, who knew Steve before, knows him all the way. It makes him afraid. Bucky wants people to know Steve, and not Captain America. Steve is worth knowing.

He is right, though, and they do have to go out — back into this exhausting world. But first: “Let me see.”

Steve hands over the sketch. At first Bucky doesn’t realize who it is he’s looking at. The drawing is of a man sitting with shadows spread out around him, and the shadows are dark and flat and threatening shapes. He holds another shadow, a pistol, with his right hand, and with his left he reaches for something unseen. His hands have immensely defined knuckles and tendons and thick square fingers. His face is in profile, his features sharp, and the lines are thick and black and minimal, drawn with a heavy hand: the prominent mouth, the heavy brow, the straight nose, and the curved chin. Hair falls from the pomade and arches over his forehead. A cigarette dangles out of his mouth and the smoke curls up. Most of his face is in shadow, and the details are only suggested. The muscles of his arms are big and the sleeveless white undershirt he wears is tight across the broad shoulders and chest. His tags glint, somehow, in the low light. He looks like he’s been sweating and working all day, and like the work has been bloody. He looks rough, and like he’d be rough with you.

It can’t be Bucky, but it is. He trusts Steve’s hand more than a mirror. It’s him.

He needs to stop pretending that he isn’t who he’s becoming.

“Huh,” he says, and hands it back. “You still got it, Rogers.”

Steve looks at it, critically. “I do, don’t I?”

Bucky puts out his cigarette, and Steve tucks away the sketchbook, and then they face the night.

—

It turns out they don’t march for another day, and so the guys have decided to spend their respite drinking Dugan’s paint peeler around the fire.

“Is this fucking moonshine?” demands Morita, after a second of astounded choking. He sounds impressed.

Dugan takes back the can for a second swig. “Maybe.”

“*Ne tirez pas,”* Dernier is saying.

“*Ne tir-ez —*“

"Tirez," Dernier corrects.

"Teach him something dirty," Dugan suggests.

"Don't do that," Bucky replies. "Teach him how to swear in two languages and his tongue will turn to stone from all the sinnin'."

Bucky of course should know better, and should know never to say anything like that to this firecracker, because Steve turns from where he sits by the fire with his eyes bright and a flush on his face says, "*Va te faire foutre,* asshole." Steve Rogers telling Bucky to go fuck himself in French: Jesus Christ, that needs to be illegal in all forty-eight states and Allied territory besides.

Bucky just flips him off, and Jones and Dernier howl with laughter.

"Corrupting Captain America," sighs Morita.

"He's corrupt enough on his own," Bucky says, and when he sits down Steve jams his elbow into his ribs.

Falsworth hums. "Art school."

Bucky fixes him with a look, feeling guilty about earlier, and jokes, "You got *no* idea," and then: "Dum Dum, hit me."

Dugan hands over his contraband alcohol right away, reaching across the fire. "Drink enough of that and maybe you'll actually sleep tonight instead or prowling around like a big angry cat, Sarge."

Bucky takes a drink. Morita was right: this shit could make you blind. "Maybe," he agrees. Dugan worries over him, but Bucky worries over Steve, and he worries about Steve sleeping somewhere safe. Bucky doesn't need to sleep, anyway; or at least he's found, through intensive trial and error, that he can manage on only a few hours a week. He doesn't like to think about it.

"*J'étudie l'art*, " says Jones.

"*Sans dec?*" asks Steve.

"*Poesie*," Jones says. Steve doesn't understand. "Poetry," Jones says.

"Buck writes," Steve offers.

"Nah," Bucky says, waving a hand, another swallow of the alcohol down. He passes it over to Steve. "I tell stories. It's a different thing.

Nothing to be proud of. Steve's got real talent."

"*Conneries*," Steve says to Bucky. Helpfully, and with big innocent eyes, he adds: "That means bullshit."

"You see what I'm sayin'? You see what I put up with?"

The guys laugh. "Jesus," Steve swears, after he takes a drink.

"Told you so," Morita says.

The look on Steve's face is affronted because of the terrible taste, and it's making Bucky laugh. "Come on, we've had worse."

"Quit makin' us seem like those kind of Irish, Barnes. Your ma —"

"Oh, Jesus."

"You know what she'd say."

"Don't I ever."

Steve tries to hand the can back. "No, no," Bucky says. "You keep drinkin'. I never get to see you all liquored up anymore."

"Can't get drunk."

"Well then maybe you just haven't practiced hard enough. You know what they say about getting to Carnegie Hall, Rogers."

Steve's laughing.

"Come *on*," Bucky says, and leans back on his elbows, knocking his knees into Steve's. Steve grimaces and takes another long drink, and he shudders when it goes down, shaking his head and passing it back to Bucky.

"Feelin' it?" Bucky asks. He grins lazily. "Yeah, you're feelin' it. I know that look."

"*Tu es le pire putain*," Steve says, and Dernier and Jones snort. "A little," Steve concedes. "I'm feeling it a *little*. Not a lot, unfortunately."

"Good enough," Bucky decides.

"You too," Steve says, and then, familiarly, "C'mon, Buck, I dare you," and so Bucky takes another drink, and it burns all the way down his

throat, and even in his nose. He gives the can over to Jones and then fishes around for another smoke and feels eyes on him. Falsworth is looking.

“You got a light?” Bucky asks.

“Of course,” he says, startled, and gives a smoke to Bucky, and his lighter.

Bucky lights up his second cigarette of the night and takes a drag. Steve plucks it nimbly out of his hand with his long artist’s fingers, inhales, flicks the ash, and then hands it back.

“Tell us a poem,” Dernier says to Jones.

“Recite,” Jones corrects, absently. “Uh, *reciter*. Man, I don’t know. What do you want to hear?”

“Something you’ve done,” Morita says. They look at him, and he shrugs. “What? I don’t want Whitman, or any of that shit. I want to hear something new.”

Jones thinks about it. He begins:

“Liberté

For my parents who came

north, ancestors sold

west and south

now choosing a direction

in hopes of better lives and

finding nothing new under

red white and blue

Am I fighting for my own freedom?

Egalité

For the boys on the front stoop

now on the front lines,

who talked of change so lines

in front of water fountains didn't come in two tones-

For my sister and my mother listening

framed by kitchen windows,

afraid their family might be crossing

lines they shouldn't, about to be

crucified-

I have found there are people

already fighting, willing defenders.

Fraternité

To the brothers I have found-

I would ask for them to lend me their ears

but they have already lent me their hands

their eyes

their blood

and so we have become of one flesh-

They already know."

"Jesus, Gabe," says Bucky, into the silence.

—

Margaret "Peggy" Carter-Rogers died one year ago today at the age of 96. Rita and Iggy might not have written any hit songs about her like they did for our favorite Avenger , but that doesn't mean she didn't shape the face of modern intelligence and, you know, change history forever when she co-founded SHIELD alongside Howard Stark and husband Steve Rogers in 1946. Here are ten of Peggy Carter's greatest hits.

…10. And if you think your *work week is hard, consider this: Carter was also involved, though peripherally, with the Manhattan Project. That's right — she was fishing out Soviet "atomic spies" and protecting US intelligence since 1942. The Rosenbergs wouldn't have been caught without her. Where would we be if Peggy Carter hadn't had our backs? There's like a 70% chance the answer is "dealing with nuclear fallout."*

So that's your basic rundown on Peggy Carter-Rogers: spy, mother, wife, and pioneer. She's dearly missed.

And let's be honest with ourselves. She probably woke up like this .

(Warren, Cate. "Ten Things Peggy Carter-Rogers Did That Were Fly As Hell." *Buzzfeed.* New York, New York, 2017. Web.)

—

"What's this?"

"Don't touch that."

Everything in Stark's lab is covered in grease and oil, and there are, thrillingly, always between one and four cigarettes burning dangerously close to something flammable. Bucky loves it here. It's like science fiction, or something from the movies. It reminds Bucky of both the garages and the factories where he's found work. He likes watching the machines go about their business. He wants to poke at everything and get his hands dirty. Things slotting neatly into other things, pistons and engines doing their work; it's his favorite thing. He feels like a kid again, and his hands itch to make about a million model airplanes.

"How's she looking?" Bucky asks.

"Glorious," Stark tells him, "*Naturally*. Jesus, what do you expect?" He shoves his goggles up onto his forehead and hands Bucky's rifle over. "New scope; tinkered with the focus, tightened up the recoil. It's an

experimental model, you understand, just something I've been doing on the side. How does it feel?"

Bucky takes the rifle and weighs it, and then he lifts it up to test the sights.

"Jesus Christ, watch where you *point that*," Stark complains, and pushes it away.

Bucky can't help but grin at him over the top of the scope. "She's beautiful, Stark. You got a couple more of these somewhere?"

"I'm already outfitting your French guy with explosives; don't get greedy. Look, I got places to be —"

"Where is it you keep rushing off to, anyway?"

Stark smirks at him. There's a dimly manic gleam in his tired eyes. "Mapping the planets with Copernicus," he says. Then he seems to spot someone approaching behind Bucky, and his spine snaps straight. "Company," he announces. "I'll see you around, Sarge."

Stark books it, as to be expected. And so Bucky starts to disassemble his rifle in the hopes of getting to know her a little better. He can hear Stark's conversation almost a room away and keeps his head down, hoping; but sure enough the telltale click-clack of small practical heels approaches him anyway. Goddammit, Bucky thinks, and then starts to swear the way that Morita has taught all of them to: God-mother-fucking-damn-it-all-to-hell-fuck.

James Barnes is a gentleman. He is a gentleman to a fault. He has never hated his gentlemanly upbringing as much as he does in this second.

"Do you have a moment?"

"A few, even." Bucky doesn't know whether to stand or stay seated, but Agent Carter solves that for him: she sits down on the opposite side of Stark's workbench before he gets the chance to even push his chair back.

"Are you liking it?" Agent Carter asks.

Bucky is confused. "What's that?"

"The Johnson."

“It’s a good gun. Stark’s made some adjustments, the recoil really used to be a bi— uh, a problem. You know.”

Carter’s red mouth tips at one side into a smile. Bucky watches as she bends and reaches into her boot. She pulls out the tiniest pistol he’s ever seen — it fits into her small palm snugly, like a black baby bird that has wet and slick feathers. “Howard made this. It’s very useful for tight situations. It gives me bruises, though. The recoil can certainly be a bitch.”

Bucky is startled into laughing. Goddamn, he thinks, but she’s so beautiful, and in every way so unexpected: really just a dime, and smart as hell to boot. Just like Steve. What a pair. And like that Bucky’s heart goes stone cold and heavy inside him, and he gets back to reassembling his rifle.

“Anything I can help you with?” he deflects.

“Oh, yes,” says Agent Carter. She procures a file. “I’ve finished some recon work outside of Montoire. There’s a heavy faction of HYDRA growing there. I have reason to believe that their goal is to march on Paris, and perhaps form a link with the headquarters located in Strasbourg.”

“Schmidt?” Bucky asks.

“Nowhere,” confesses Carter, sighing. “The base self-destructed before I could get anything else.”

Bucky stares at her. “You stormed a HYDRA base? *Alone*?” And just like that he suddenly has not only one but two insufferably stupid Steves in his life. He remembers his manners too late. “Carter, look, it’s not that I don’t think —“

“I infiltrated,” Carter corrects. She doesn’t sound too clipped, and Bucky hopes that he hasn’t made her angry. Except, of course, how he does. “Things just got…out of hand.”

Jesus God, thinks Bucky: there really *are* two of them. “I see,” he says, faintly.

“Anyway. This is for you and Captain Rogers to look over. I’ve spoken to Colonel Phillips and this should be where you’re headed next. Many of the operatives survived the blast, and they’ve gone to ground. We’ll fish them out soon enough. They could prove useful.”

Bucky takes the file. He flips it open to find a blueprint of the base and Carter's mission report. "Useful, huh?" he mutters, speculative. "Well, we all know I got a way with useful."

He regrets it for a second, speaking to a lady about that, but then Carter replies, unflinchingly: "Yes, you certainly do."

Bucky looks up at her. He comes to the late realization that this intel should have gone to Steve, and not to him.

Carter has pinned him with her eyes now. In this light they have the color of pennies, arresting and copperish. "In fact," she continues, "That's something I've been meaning to speak to you about. The project that Howard is currently working on is facing some difficulties, and we might be able to use your — expertise, as it is."

"That so?"

"I assume that you're in no rush to leave the strike team. But I thought I'd warn you that there are a number of people who are eager to recruit you. And after the war…well, you'll certainly have a job somewhere, if you want it."

Bucky thinks this over. He doesn't make it a habit to think past the war, not the way that he knows the other guys do. He stopped doing that since the table. "Muscle or intelligence?"

"Both, potentially. You've developed a very unique skill set, and you would be a tremendous asset."

Bucky is just opening his mouth to reply — he has no idea what he's going to say, but he is going to say something — when they both start at the sound of Steve's voice, calling his name.

"Buck, hey, I was thinking we'd — Peggy. I mean, ma'am."

So Bucky has to sit through this again, it looks like. At least he's got his Johnson back in one piece and so he can get out of here before Steve manages to turn any redder or accidentally knock over some chairs. This conversation with Carter has put him on edge enough; he doesn't want to see Steve all sweet and embarrassed just now, and he especially doesn't want her to be the cause of it. It makes his stomach turn unpleasantly; it makes him want to touch Steve, somehow, or make him laugh: he wants to show her. It's an ugly thought — not, he scoffs to himself, a *gentlemanly* one — and so he pushes it back, and stands himself up.

“Carter,” he nods.

Her eyes are sharp. Steve hasn’t distracted her, and there isn’t a doubt in his mind that they will be talking about this later. “Barnes.”

Bucky slaps Steve on the shoulder as he passes. “See you?”

“Where you going?” Steve asks, his brow furrowing up.

At the doorway Bucky holds up his rifle. “Where do you think? Testing her out.”

—

24 RUE DE L’ARBRE-SEC

DR A Z

LYON, FRANKREICH

DOCH WERDEN SIE ANBEIßEN?

—

“But will they bite,” Jones translates. He frowns at the intercepted telegram. “But will they *bite*. Bite what?”

“Bait,” Bucky says. “Like we’re fish, or at least someone is. Like someone is fish.”

And so they go to France, but there’s nothing in France: nothing but the beautiful abandoned buildings and the frightened crying people. Lyon turns up nothing. Dernier looks sad to be home. If New York ever ended up like this Bucky would be sad too. Finally they give up the ghost and receive orders to march to a safe house miles and miles away.

“Hurry up to wait,” mumbles Steve in their tent, and under the cover of darkness.

“That’s the killing business,” Bucky replies, pragmatic.

News is bad. News is always bad. They’re losing more men on the front, and more money to the fight, and there’s already no money to be had. Europe is in greasy dying tatters. Bucky thinks of the bodies in

the furnace, and the word of the camps.

They walk and walk. They walk, and then: revelation.

—

“Jesus Christ,” Dugan says. There isn’t even any sarcasm in his voice. He is honestly and innocently dumbstruck. Bucky imagines this is how he was as a kid. “Cap, you sure we’re at the right place?”

Steve’s jaw is hanging open. “Yeah,” he replies, and corrects, “Well, I mean, these were the coordinates.”

It’s a castle, or a mansion; either way it is, without a doubt, the biggest and most beautiful building Bucky has ever seen. The grounds are massive and dignified and ancient and blue and white; there are statues, real life, honest-to-God statues. There’s a courtyard, and bushes shorn into various geometrical if overgrown shapes. Withering wildflowers have staked claim over the grounds. They crush them under their filthy boots as they walk; the flowers smell good, even though they are dying.

“Agent Carter said that it’ll be tight quarters,” says Steve as they approach.

A lot of nasty responses come to Bucky’s mind at that one — what, nice English lady is used to better digs than this? — but he bites down on all of them. This is a beautiful place; he can’t be cruel, not in a beautiful place. “Don’t really see that being a problem.”

“She told me that there are a lot of works from the Louvre being held here. Have been since ’39. The French moved them out when Nazi forces started marching; they didn’t want the art to get damaged if Paris ends up burning. So a lot of it is packed inside.”

Bucky grins at him. Things are funny. Things are strange. “Hey, ain’t I always promising to go into the Met with you? Here we are, and one better. Art museum. In *France*.”

Steve rolls his eyes, and Bucky cuffs him.

There are tall steps that lead to the entrance door. The stairs are lined with big statues of stone lions. Bucky looks deep into their frozen and ferocious maws. Their teeth glint. The door is painted ivory, and the paint is peeling. When Steve swings it open it goes quietly.

The dull afternoon light illuminates all the dust they've disturbed, and it floats finely through the air. The entryway is huge, and the floor inside is marble — *marble,* Steve, Bucky wants to say. But Bucky can hardly see any of the floor, because the entire room is filled with crates: huge crates, tiny crates, open crates. The open crates hold oil paintings.

Silently the company picks their way through. One of the paintings — Bucky stays back to look at it. Only half is visible. Bucky sees five fingers digging into a man's naked torso, pulling his skin, and drawing pinpricks of blood. The colors are vibrant and the skin looks unimaginably real. In the background there are bodies, and the bodies are on fire. It scares him, and so he catches up with the team.

Somehow he doesn't see it at first. Maybe because it's so unimaginably huge; when he first walks in, he only notices the base. But then he looks up, and up, and up. She is maybe ten feet tall. Her back is arched and she stands with her right foot forward, planted strongly to her rock, like she may jump, or fly, or is flying. A pair of massive wings — feathered, and muscular, and thick — expand back and away. Her marble robes billow and whip around her legs, and press tight to her lean torso; the fierce line of her shoulders is slanted. She has no face and no arms. The dusty orange light illuminates the strong lines of her thighs and shoulders: it catches on her stone clothing, and it casts a shadow for each and every feather.

Bucky looks to Steve.

"*Mon Dieu,*" says Dernier, and his voice is blankly stunned.

Steve — slowly, slowly, he paces around her. He can't seem to look away. His blue eyes are almost translucent in the dusk light. His face is naked.

"*Elle est encore plus belle que j'ai jamais cru possible,*" says Dernier, still quiet.

"*Oui,*" says Steve, and his hushed voice breaks on him. "*Oui."*

Bucky doesn't know what they're saying; Bucky doesn't care. He's arrested where he stands. She has no face — she has no face.

"Who is she?" asks Jim.

"The Winged Victory of Samothrace." It's Steve who answers. His voice is almost silent, but so is the room, and the sound echoes off the

dust. “She’s the goddess of victory. Nike. They found her in the 1800’s. I didn’t even think…”

Steve turns away very suddenly and looks to Bucky. “Buck,” he says, and his voice is helpless and lost.

“Yeah,” Bucky replies, and he steps closer, so their shoulders touch. Bucky knows the truth now. It is a deep and insurmountable truth. She has no face. Like the operative whose head he beat in, like the boy who he killed one month into active duty, even like Bucky himself, Nike is faceless. Bucky feels unprepared, or like he should have brought an offering.

Beside him Steve quakes before the oldest and the only god.

“Buck,” Steve repeats, strangled now. His brows are drawn together and his mouth is twisted. His lashes are dark and wet. Bucky has mud on his face and his toes are numb, and Steve is no better: filthy hair, and blood dried at his lip. When he looks finally to Bucky the moment stretches, precariously balanced. The world whittles away, and boils down the untruths. They are the only people in the room. They are, familiarly, the only people in the world.

The dust motes float through the air and land on her monumental wings.

“Well, go on,” Bucky says.

“What?” Steve asks.

Bucky nods to her. “Go on, Stevie.”

“I can’t,” says Steve immediately.

Bucky thinks of whispering to Steve during mass when he shouldn’t have been, and of kissing girls in the confessional. Churches are holy, and Nike is ancient, but Steve is Steve: first, last, and always.

“Sure you can,” Bucky replies.

Tentatively and slowly Steve outstretches his dirty hand. Bucky watches his long fingers reach, his skin pink and suddenly translucent in the sunlight. Abruptly he becomes as unreal as Nike: as endless, and as ancient. When he touches the marble fabric of her clothing he inhales, sharply. He flattens his palm there at the defiant line of her hip, and then he tilts his noble head up, and he looks to her.

—

Here's a story your mama told me.

When she came over on the boat she kept getting sick and she couldn't figure out why. Eventually this lady came up to see if she was fine, and she asked her, when are you due? And your ma said, no, I'm only seasick.

I'm supposed to take the rest of this story to the grave, but I doubt anyone will care to find these anyway.

So it turned out the woman from the Old Country was right, and your ma cried herself sick because she was so scared and alone. You see now why I was supposed to take this one to the grave? She asks the woman, the hell will I do? I don't have any money and nobody on God's green Earth will hire an Irish girl fresh off the ship, especially when she's in a family way. Now the woman, she was feeling terrible about this, terrible for this young girl who had nowhere else to turn. And the woman's husband, he'd died in the war. So she slipped off the band around her finger and put it on your mama's. Then she told your ma her last name, and her husband's first name, and said it was time to start over again anyway. So your ma did. She bought a plot at the cemetery and said it was your da's. That grave is empty, same way mine will be. That rosary you got with you, the one you think is his -- it was hers. It was hers all along.

After she finished whispering it out to me, the whole truth of her life, she started hacking up a lung. I got her water, I remember, and then I asked — well, what anyone else would, I guess. I asked why she did it. Why she picked me to tell. She looked me in the eye and she said, remember how she used to call me, she said, "James Buchanan, I'm not long for this Earth. I told you because I know. You and me; you and me, James, we're the same kind of storyteller."

I still don't understand what it was that she knew. I got my suspicions. I think she saw in me the thief and impostor she saw in herself. We understood one another, your ma and I. I was a good kid, back home — straight A's till I dropped out, good at my job, good to my dates, a gentleman. I was so proud of those things, and turns out it don't matter at all. Even though you were the troublemaker we were both from the wrong side of the tracks. Brooklyn tough, and no changing us — do anything for each other, won't we? I've stolen and lied and cheated, and mostly, I've done it for you. Not because you asked — you didn't ask your ma either, and you would never ask anyone, considering you'd choke on your pride if you ever tried swallowing it. But like me, she did it for you all the same.

She told me that at first she was scared as hell of loving you. She said she didn't know if she could, because she thought she'd always be waiting for you to die, and she couldn't stand anyone else dyin on her. I finally bucked up and asked her how long she had actually loved you for. You know what she told me? She said, that's a stupid question.

She died in the night while we slept in our beds. I heard the news first, because I guess I was just up and out first, taking her bread, or soup, or something. All I saw of her was her white hand while they took her away. I remember walking all the way back to your apartment, hadn't seen you in maybe a day and a half, and I knew I had to tell you but I also knew I didn't want to. So I let myself in, quiet as a mouse, and sure enough you were still asleep in bed. All I could do was look at you and wish to God that I could put a spin on this one, too — make it all alright again.

At the end she was so tired.

Never really thought about the future. Never really could think much past you. In that respect, your ma and I had something in common, God rest her soul. But neither of us, I don't think, were ever meant for much. Here's the truth — baby, here's the truth. I've got a rootless heart. I don't think I'm meant for loving, or at least not anymore. And I should die out here. I'm the kind of guy who's not meant to go back. I try to imagine a life after this and it just won't come. So forget about me, will you? If it'll make you happy. Live glorious, eat like a king, laugh until the sun comes up, never look back. Don't you dare look back. More than anything I want to know that you kept on. More than anything I want to know that you took on the world — everything else seems to matter less and less.

So how long have I loved you for? Womb to tomb, sweetheart. Since before I was even here at all. I get it now, you understand. Your ma was right. It really is a stupid question.

—

THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL, and on the other side of the knife — Hitler youth, with eyes blue as the Connecticut sky — Bucky carves, FOR I AM THE EVILEST MOTHERFUCKER IN THE VALLEY.

—

In the mirror Bucky twists his mouth to the left to get a better angle for the shave. He finishes up, runs the tap, grabs a towel. He thinks of nothing in particular. When he pulls the towel away there's a little drop of red on it. Bucky pats at the side of his face and then down

along his jaw. Back at the hinge of it he feels wetness. Tipping his head so he can see it in the mirror, Bucky feels around. There's only a little blood — somehow he's scraped himself up. A thin little piece of skin is hanging loose, like maybe he accidentally pulled off a scab. He gets it between his thumb and forefinger and pulls. It doesn't hurt. He pulls, and underneath his skin there's red, like a muscle, but smoother. Bucky pulls more. He pulls and pulls. Now he can see all the sinew of his jaw and beneath it the bone. He gets a better grip. The cartilage of his nose comes away with the skin. He pulls —

It's only by the skin of his teeth that he catches the scream and holds it inside his throat. Around him the men are out cold, and even Steve is asleep, all curled up with his blond head facing away. Bucky's breath is coming in huge gasps and his eyes are wet. The fire is low, casting weird shadows across the ground.

"Sarge?"

Bucky starts and turns. It's Jones. He's propped again a tree, rifle in hand, on watch.

"Sarge," Jones repeats, wary.

"Fine," Bucky says, quiet, so as not to wake anyone. "Perimeter clear?"

"Clear."

Bucky's heart is hammering in his mouth. He swallows hard. "You're a prayin' man, aren't you, Private?"

"Yeah," Jones agrees.

"You still got your faith?"

"Yeah."

"You think I can still pray, even if I don't got much faith left? I mean, do you think it's alright? You think it's allowed?"

Jones thinks about this. Bucky appreciates that. After a moment he says, "Yes. I think He's always listening, and that He listens to everyone. I think there's always a chance at redemption."

Bucky's fingers shake when he reaches over and starts digging around in Steve's pack. Jones doesn't seem worried. It takes a second, but

there it is: the familiar worn and ovular beads of his rosary. Bucky draws it out and holds the heavy metal of the crucifix in his palm. With his right hand he makes the sign of the cross and mumbles out the words. In the name of the Father at his forehead, and the Son between his ribs, and the Holy Ghost in the hollows of his shoulders, Amen. He worries the beads as he keeps track of his prayers. Jones doesn't say another word.

…And because of this as well, these letters are irrevocably entrenched in pop culture — in the way that we, as a society, quantify emotions like love or pain. In fact, they have redefined our collective consciousness. We love them because they're a scandal, and because they're sensational, but we also love them because they give us a look into the past, into our national past. And maybe that past isn't exactly what we thought it was. I think that all Americans have a sort of vested idealism in the 1940's; we try to emulate the styles, or we're envious of how much simpler or sweeter life was back then. Barnes shows us that none of that is true. He ensures that the scales fall from our eyes. It was a slice of time like any other, and if there was a difference, it's that life was harder.

Obviously a lot of Barnes' life was impacted by the Great Depression. I think that one letter in particular shows the economic hardship in a way that's really vivid and touching. And maybe it's quaint, sure, but that's not what I want you to get from this reading. What I want to impart on you, on each of you, is that the struggle of the human condition — of simply living — is timeless and universal. There is no one right philosophical lens through which to read these. And that's what makes these letters so special: we can't fit them into any one category. No literature professor, no history professor, no economics professor, no gender studies professor; hell, not even a philosopher like myself…none of us can claim that these letters belong to our fields and our fields alone. They belong to all of us. As a country they identify us and as a people they move us. So with this in mind I'd like to thank you for being such an attentive and responsive audience today, and if you don't mind, I'll go ahead and finish off my first TED Talk with this reading, which is of James Barnes' second-to-last letter. And a brief note for context: records tell us that he was shot in battle just before

Christmas in 1944. The wound was nearly fatal.

"Look, I'm sorry I worried you so bad. I'm just fine, except maybe now you know how I felt last year, when you almost bled out under my hands while I stood there like some kind of helpless schmuck, not having the first God damn idea what to do. I don't remember a whole lot about the ordeal, but I do remember you shoving your belt between my teeth. I remember I wasn't allowed to make a lick of noise due to how far behind enemy lines we were, and I remember trying like hell not to. It hurt, sure. Hurt like the Devil himself was digging down and trying to pull out my insides.

I remember after it was over you pressing your forehead against mine. You didn't say a word but I knew you were afraid. I shut my eyes and for a second I could pretend I was back in Brooklyn. I pretended that our faces were too close because we were sharing a bed in the middle of winter and you had rolled over in your sleep. I swear to God, in that second I could smell the charcoal on your hands from drawing all day, and the motor oil on my skin from working at the garage. When you let out a breath I could even smell the sharp sweet tang of oranges.

Right then I didn't tell myself any stories. I was dying, and I was glad that it was happening while I was next to you.

You know, I don't think I've ever told you the whole story before. It's like everything started around that winter. Like I orbit it, sucked into that year by some big cosmic force of gravity.

It was 1940, the year you kept almost dying on me, but this was before all that. Winter was just coming, and the cough you had was only little, not keeping you in bed for weeks at a time. I knew that even if I couldn't pay for heat I had to pay at least for some more blankets or quilts. I remember thinking that even if I could steal food I'd need money for your medications.

It was when I got laid off from the garage, and the factory jobs had run out in Brooklyn and Queens — I think this part you know. I went all over Manhattan, but no one in Midtown wanted to hire me. Finally I ended up at a deli and I flattered the old fella behind the counter with some bullshit I can't even remember now, maybe how great their cheesecake was, but anyway he finally let me in on a few trade secrets about who around town was looking for help. Anyway, I got the gig at

the docks in Chelsea. It was only part time and eventually I had to replace it with the dock job back home, but it was alright money while I could get it. I worked maybe five hours that day, and on the way back to our rickety place I was feeling so lucky I stopped by the market. If you were a dame I probably would have tried to buy you a ring. I could have taken on the whole world because I had the dollar fifty in my pocket they paid me for working on such short notice. It was the first real money I felt like I'd had in years.

So I was walking around the market, looking around, dried this, canned that…and then I saw some oranges. Heavenly choirs sang when I looked at those oranges. They were so bright and I'd just worked a hard, cold shift, and you had been looking blue and sick for weeks. And all of a sudden the inspiration struck me, and I knew what I had to do.

I swear to God I haggled with Mr. O'Leary over that one single orange for fifteen minutes straight. There was something important to me that day about buying it with the money I'd just made. Finally I got it low enough.

I'll never forget the look on your face when I came in the door and tossed it to you. I can't even describe it. I'd do anything on earth to make you look at me again like that. I'd fill your whole room up with oranges. I'd fill the apartment with them. The building, even. Give them to you in baskets until the day I die and arrange for them to be sent even after that.

Well, then of course you started worrying over the price and wouldn't hear of eating it all on your own. So you made me split it with you. I can still taste it — the way it broke so sweet and tart on my tongue, got sticky all over my fingers. Do you remember, we even kept squeezing the skin because little bursts of flavor would puff out away from it that we could see and smell. I don't think I've ever tasted anything like that before or since. It was like a whole summer feast laid out right in front of us, even though it was just one fruit and not summer at all, but instead that terrible time of year when winter sneaks down; starts killing the flowers.

Never told another soul this, and I guess I never will, but I think of that orange, that one evening, every single time when I'm sure I'm about to snuff it for real. Thought about it in my first firefight and thought about it when the Germans stuck me full of needles and sliced up the soles of my feet. And when I was shot the other day and so sure it was over — good-bye, motherfuckers, I'm finally going back home

— I wasn't all that scared. In that one minute it was fine — everything was alright. I bought an orange. You smiled at me. And Jesus Christ, it was fantastic."

(Kapoor, Neha. "James Barnes and the curation of our collective consciousness." TED Talk. 2006.)

1945

"Hey," calls Dugan, "Bulletproof Barnes!"

Bucky gives a careful mock-bow as he approaches from the other side of the command tent. Dugan pushes out a chair at the table with his foot. "Goddamn, you know how to treat a lady," Bucky grunts, and sits down across him.

Dugan huffs a laugh. "Funny you say that," he says. "Mrs. Dugan wrote."

"Yeah?"

"Dear Timothy," Dugan recites, "Well you haven't written since June, and I am aware of soldiers and their indiscretions —"

"Aw, Jesus, Dum Dum, I'm sorry."

"All's fair, isn't it? In divorce and war."

"If it makes you feel any better, I screwed a girl in France."

Dugan chuckles. "You pay for it, too?"

"With this face? Come on."

"Were you this much of an asshole before Pearl Harbor?"

"Nah," Bucky says, truthfully, and quieter. "Not even close."

Dugan nods, and looks at his hands. "For the best," he says, after a

moment. “She deserves better, don’t she?”

Bucky thinks of Steve’s hands cupping his face out in the field the other day. *No no no no no*, he mouthed, and whispered, *Buck*, and pressed their foreheads together. “Probably, pal. Probably.”

Dugan heaves a sigh. “Enough of that. How you feeling?”

“Patched me up good,” Bucky says. He’s only a little sore, after all.

Dugan eyes him. “Don’t lie to me, kid.”

“I ain’t lyin’,” Bucky defends. “Sure it hurts, but it’s alright. You’re half as bad as Steve.”

“No, it’s Cap who ain’t half as bad as me,” Dugan mumbles, cryptically. “Where is he, anyway?”

“Napping,” Bucky says. In Bucky’s cot, too — he wouldn’t leave overnight, and he insisted on working all day, and he fell asleep finally in the afternoon, at Bucky’s desk. Bucky had worried about a crick in his neck and prodded him into bed. “I’ll wake him up before 1900 hours. Colonel sent orders, and Steve wants to debrief.”

“Carter?”

“No. I don’t know. She’s somewhere else. Business in town, maybe.”

They sit in silence for a moment. Dugan lights up a cigarette, and Bucky looks over at him to see his square and sturdy face illuminated for a second by the flame. Then it flickers out. Bucky doesn’t know why he says what he does next. Maybe it’s because he hasn’t told anyone yet, or because he almost died just this week. “She offered me a job.”

Dugan looks suspicious. “Carter?” he asks.

“After all this is over there are positions open. Stark needs muscle on a project, so she says.”

“What’s the work?” Dugan is squinting. He doesn’t like this.

“Well, I got a skill, don’t I?”

Dugan really doesn’t like this. He sucks on his cigarette for a moment, his mustache tilted down. “You got plenty of skills. What I’m asking is, which one of those skills do Stark and Carter want?”

Bucky reaches across the table and steals one of Dugan's smokes. He fishes a stolen lighter out of his pocket. "Interrogation," he finally says.

"Barnes —"

"I could bleed a stone, and you know it. It's a useful trick."

"You want to, though? You really want to do that?"

Bucky takes a deep inhale and blows the smoke out his nose. It burns. "What the hell else will I do? Hmm? If I even get out of this. Go on; I'm takin' suggestions."

"Damned if I know," admits Dugan quietly. "Jesus; damned if I know."

"You ever think, it's been two years since we've seen the city?" asks Bucky.

"Two goddamn years," Dugan affirms.

"I don't think I can go back. I don't think I'm —" Bucky cuts himself off and sucks in a breath. "Anyway. Doubt I'll even make it that far."

"Well, you can always shack up with that French girl."

Bucky rolls his eyes.

After a while Bucky stubs out his smoke, and Dugan sighs. "Me neither," he says. "I mean, I don't know what I'd be doin', if I wasn't doin' this. I think I forgot how to do other things. What else is there, but killin' Krauts?"

Bucky understands. Nothing else makes sense anymore. The world has narrowed down: Steve's hair, dirty from the mud; the footsteps of the team, sticking to wet orange autumn leaves; the weight of the rifle on his back, and the weight of his knives in his shoes.

Dugan pulls out another cigarette and sticks his hand out for Bucky's lighter. After he lights up he holds it closer so he can read it. DEATH IS OUR BUSINESS, Bucky has carved, AND BUSINESS HAS BEEN GOOD.

"I like this one," Dugan tells him.

"Keep it," Bucky says.

—

It turns out that Carter has finally found some solid intel — Zola surfaced somewhere near Zermatt, which is, according to Morita, apparently some hellhole in Switzerland. Zola either moving north or northwest. Bucky's hoping for north; he's never had any particular desire to see the Swiss Alps up close. On top of the table with big sheets of sketchbook paper and even some napkins pushed together, Steve maps out a number of possible routes he might be taking. Everyone has a couple of theories about what Zola was doing so far south — gathering intel, conspiring with the Italian communists — but to Bucky, they all sound wrong.

"Zola's a scientist, first and foremost." It's a weird power Bucky has these days: he speaks up, and immediately a hush falls. "If he's in Italy he's either transporting cargo back to Austria or Germany, or maybe he was dropping cargo off there. For all we know HYDRA might be growing in Italy. But if it's Zola, then it has something to do with his experiments. I know him. He wouldn't travel on politics; he's too valuable for that."

The guys are nodding but there's something wrong with the way that Steve, standing beside Bucky, is holding himself. They get through the rest of the informal briefing alright, but by nighttime Steve has still got that almighty furrow tucked between his brows. Bucky, fed up, corners him in the hall outside of the mess after dinner.

"Say it," he says finally, after all he gets is a halfhearted "hey" in greeting.

"Say what, Buck?" asks Steve.

Bucky waves a hand. "Whatever's bothering you. You're worrying at it so hard you're giving me a headache. Maybe a second pair of eyes on the problem will do you good."

Steve remains silent and serious as they walk. Finally he starts. "I know back when — back *when*. After the base. I know it shook you up. I just…"

"You just what?"

Steve huffs a sigh and turns to look at Bucky fully. They've reached the end of the building and stand in the open doorway, coming to a stop. "I just want to make sure that when you made your report to Phillips you told him everything that you knew."

Steve looks like he'd have more fun getting teeth pulled. He's pained and uncomfortable and apologetic, but to Bucky it doesn't change the fact of what's coming out of his mouth.

"What?"

Steve finally meets his gaze. The moonlight bathes their conversation in a strange and eerie glow. "I'm not sayin' anything, Buck. But you seem to know an awful lot about Zola from your time in that base, and if you think any of it might help us out I'd really appreciate if you'd tell me."

Fear holds Bucky where he stands.

This is the problem: Bucky himself doesn't know what he remembers about his time in that base. It is literally impossible for him to think back on it. He remembers only a few things. He knows with an intimacy that makes his stomach churn Zola's voice; he'd recognize it deaf. He remembers the pain in his feet, though that could have easily come after, from the walk back to camp.

He remembers chomping down on a bit. The whole ordeal was a blur of pain, but he thinks he remembers a specific spike agony, one that rippled underneath his skin. After that there isn't much else. When things come back to him it's because something odd has reminded him of it. And then the knowledge, like it did earlier, spills out of his mouth without him entirely noticing while it happens.

So Bucky digs up one of his many talents. He turns on his smile and lies. "Jeez, you getting dense, Rogers? We know the man's a scientist. Doctor. Doesn't matter. We know he's in that profession, and it doesn't make any sense at all for him to be sent out on a political trip, does it?"

"No," agrees Steve. He shakes his head.

"Hey, you been sleeping?" asks Bucky. He feels terrible about it, absolutely terrible, but that doesn't stop him. It's a distraction. He feels in a visceral and gut-churning way that he needs to distract Steve. Sick with himself he puts a hand on Steve's arm and squeezes. He can't stop himself from doing it. It's strangely instinctual. "You gotta get your rest, Steve. It's a big one coming up."

"Yeah," Steve agrees, and gives him his sweet smile. Bucky feels awful. He feels absolutely godawful. "Yeah, of course; you're right, Buck. I'm sorry about all that."

“Nah,” Bucky says. “No harm, no foul.”

Steve tells him goodnight and to sleep well, and he heads on off. Bucky wanders over to the barracks, a little more slowly. Over his raggedy shirt Bucky presses his fingers to where the bullet wound was. He’s already taken the dressing off. It’s been six days and he can’t even feel a twinge. He pokes at it. There won’t be any scar, he already knows. Just that weird newborn pink skin in a little circle where the slug went inside.

“Steve?” Bucky calls.

Steve turns. His hair is gold in the low yellow light and his face is wide open. Bucky’s vision goes double for a second as he remembers how Steve was before, that tiny asshole kid with his too-big nose and huge blue eyes overlaid on Steve now: six feet tall, strong as an ox. Bucky waits in the moment just long enough to feel it settle. Steve’s eyes on him is one thing that doesn’t ever get old. Bucky aches for him all the way down to the meat of his soul. It breaks his heart sometimes, just looking at Steve.

“Sleep well, alright?” Bucky says, and means it this time.

Steve’s mouth tilts in a tired smile. “You too, Buck,” he says, and the warm low tone of his voice is the only thing that gets Bucky back to his cot in one entire piece. He feels it in him tonight — the noise in his head. He figures he’s got enough time before lights out to get it down on paper. This big swell in his heart. He won’t have time, not once they’ve got their orders for marching. While he lights up a cigarette and makes his way back to the barracks he lets his mind wander, aimless. By the time he gets a pen out his smoke is halfway gone. He’s almost at the end of this little leather-bound journal, too. He takes a drag of his cigarette, and thinks, the way he does so much, about Steve.

Bucky puts his pen to the paper and writes, *There are a bunch of stories in this world.*

—

I guess we didn’t know what to expect from the Russians, but when you looked at them and examined them, you couldn’t tell whether, you know? If you put an American uniform on them, they could have been American.

(Gaddis, John Lewis. The Cold War: A New History. New York: the Penguin Group, 2005. Print.)

—

EMPFÄNGER : [redacted]

ABSENDER: Dr [redacted]

AKTION: INTEL

STATUS: UNVOLLENDET

APRIL 1944

LUXEMBOURG

THEMA: Der Unteroffizier muß lebend gefasst und zurückerlangt werden zwecks weiterer Untersuchungen. Falls das Versuchsobjekt nicht in deutschen Besitz gebracht wird, werden weitere Maßnahmen ergriffen. Eine Falle ist möglicherweise nötig.

("The Sergeant must be captured alive and reclaimed for purposes of additional testing. If the subject is not acquired, further measures will be taken. A trap may be necessary yet."*)*

—

Later in the snow a soldier opens his eyes.

Notes

"*1941*"

- Real headline

"*1943*"

- Source for Steve's address
- There are a bunch of different kinds of rations depending on who you are and where you are (for example, paratroopers don't get the same rations as people working on bases as people out in the field), but Steve and Buck likely got C-rations and D-rations. C-rations were individual, ready-to-eat rations that came in cans. D-rations were emergency rations, usually just a bar of chocolate with a zillion carbs. Cigarettes were found in C-rations, and they came in packs of either nine or three. Common brands were Raleighs, Chesterfields, or Fleetwoods. It's fair to say that back home Buck would have smoked Camels or Pall Malls, but of course Steve would know Bucky's favorite. Marlboros really were marketed toward women until around the 1950's.
- Bucky doesn't refer to himself as Romani because, as far as my research showed, it wasn't accurate for the time period.
- Bucky mentions that the smell of burning bodies is sometimes sweet — this is actually true, and a result of cerebrospinal fluid, which apparently smells a little like perfume when it burns.
- Each branch of the military had a slightly different letter of condolence; "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that…" was the beginning of the Army's. (The Navy's, for example, was "the Navy department deeply regrets to inform you…")
- Funny fact about "G.I." — it stands for, get this, "government issue", and isn't any official way to refer to a soldier, just something that sort of started happening during WWII. So many puns about Steve *literally* being government issue. *So many*.

- The Boy Scouts were founded in 1910, so Buck's "scout's honor" is historically accurate

- Credit for all of Bucky's home-life headcanons & his summer trips to Hartford, CT goes to conversations with Emily's darling Winifred anon

- The more often you shoot, the hotter the barrel gets, and the hotter the barrel gets the less accurate your shot will be, and also the more wear & tear the barrel will show, which will make your shot less accurate anyway in the long run. This is still a problem in today's sniper rifles, so it was probably a lot worse in the 40's.

"1944"

- Steve's "famous reply" is a paraphrased (because I didn't write it down) version of an actual "famous quote" by Steve Rogers that can be found at the very end of the Avengers STATION exhibit in Times Square. It was so glaringly unlike anything Steve would say I had to include it somehow.

- Standard issue field med kits really didn't have a needle or dental floss or anything like that that could be useful in sewing someone up.

- Some background on the USO: founded in '41, the United Service Organizations Inc. provided and provides services and live entertainment for US troops, and during WWII they had bases all over Allied territory where soldiers could see a movie or dance or have some time to themselves. And Buck is right: the hostesses at the dances were usually girls picked from the church congregation of whoever had organized the event, and often Methodist. The USO also provided "Camp Shows," which is what we see Steve and the girls performing at in CATFA.

- Britain was consistently a decade or two behind the United States in terms of music. Jazz became popular there in the 1930s, and spread to Europe by the 40s. Swing dancing varied between countries and even regions.

- Steve's line about Bucky charming Mussolini is a nod to Sentinel of Liberty #12, AKA that issue where Bucky has been seriously injured in the field and spends his entire hospital stay trying to

talk all the nurses and possibly Steve into an orgy

- Fittingly, "I'll Be Seeing You" topped the charts in 1944, and so it's the last song that comes on in the pub.
- London was indeed in a blackout throughout the war on account of the Blitz.
- On the NYT bestsellers list: I dug this up from an ANCIENT pdf, and so the second bestseller for that date is actually accurate, and was actually number one, but obviously the letters topped that. Oh, 1975. You and your meditation techniques.
- All of the phrases Bucky carves into his liberated lighters and knives are taken directly from engraved US soldiers' lighters from Vietnam.
- Buck sings "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," which was in the Top 100 of '44.
- Inspiration for the first stanza of Gabe's poem from Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City".
- Everything Steve says about artwork being moved from the Louvre to other locations for fear of it being destroyed or taken by the Nazis is true. The boys' safe house is the Chateau de Valençay, which is a ways south of Paris, and the Winged Victory really was kept there. The mansion wouldn't actually have been filled with that much other artwork, as a lot of the Louvre's paintings were sent to other places throughout the country, but this was more dramatic, and I liked that.
- Before joining the guys, Bucky is distracted by a painting, which is Bouguereau's Dante and Virgil In Hell. This actually hung (and hangs!) in the Musee D'Orsay, and so I don't know where it was moved to, or if it was moved at all, but the symbolism was just too good to pass up. It's a really massive and striking piece.
- The Winged Victory is actually about eighteen feet tall because she's on a massive slab of rock. The statue alone is around eight feet high, and it was moved without the base, so that's about how tall it was for Steve & the boys.
- Other notable pieces kept at the Valençay during the war were the Venus de Milo and Michelangelo's Dying Slave.

- A lot of Sarah Rogers' backstory is inspired by the fic "The stone's in the midst of it all" by togina.
- TED talks actually started in 2006! More you know. Also timely, considering that's when TIME published their article on Buck.
- Valencia oranges are in season through early November, were available in the US, and were first grown in the 19th century, so no banana apocalypse problems here. This is a thing that I have researched.

"1945"

- The Cold War: A New History is an actual book, and the quote used is an actual quote from it.

Compilation

Chapter Summary

> They belong to all of us. As a country they identify us and as a people they move us.

Chapter Notes

> We got a lot of requests for all of the letters arranged together, chronologically. Here you go!

I.
What I wouldn't God damn give for you to have been this healthy three years ago, that winter when you almost died on me in the middle of the night from that rattle in your chest. I spent one month scared as hell that you were going to stop breathing and then two weeks worrying that the next time you coughed there'd be blood in your hand, and you'd be gone from me just like that, same way as your mama before you, God rest her soul. I didn't think I could stand it, having to bury you. Even now I'd rather eat my own gun than see you dead.

I hate them. I hate them for what they did to you. You won't ever understand that, I don't think. I mean, sure, I'm glad that you're finally in one piece and I don't have to worry about a strong wind knocking you over. I'm glad you don't have bad lungs and that it doesn't hurt when you walk for too long. The outside finally matches the inside, and now everyone — the whole world, I guess — can see just what it is you're made of. I'm not mad about that.

It's selfish maybe but I didn't want you out here. When I shipped out I kept thinking, at least he's stowed away safe. I even thought, when I get myself killed out there, maybe it'll convince him to stop trying to get in. And that was the one good thing I had in my head every time I was listening to enemy fire, convinced I wasn't making the march back. So what if you volunteered, like you said. You've always been your own. The one thing you've always been, hell or high water, is your own. Can't deny you that. I would never try besides. But you're going to see killing, these next couple days. You're going to see the truth of the world, and the hell that lives inside. So answer me this, and be honest now: Isn't that just trading out one sickness for another?

II.
They fucked me up, but I don't ever wanna tell you just how bad. I won't even now, don't even want to think those things in your direction. But I will tell you — mostly because God willing you'll never see these — I will tell you that when you first came for me I thought, hand to the Lord, that I was finally dead. And then I figured it was just another trick. They did that, made me think you were there. They'd shoot me up with something, and after I felt it slide through my veins under my skin I would see you, or I'd hear you, and I'd say your name the way I used to. You know what I mean — that nickname you hated, the one I still sometimes say just to rile you up because you're amazing when I piss you off, your face all red like that, something about the fact that I can get your heart going.

But that name, I'd say it over and over. Up until I realized that they were back to their old drill, asking how's that feel, does it hurt when I cut here? How about the sole of his foot next? And then I'd go back to it, name, rank, serial number. You wouldn't believe all the German I learned on that table. It was a God damn language lesson.

And now I'm trekking around with you, killing anyone who's got a swastika on and looks at you wrong, and I'll tell you, my feet bled for three days straight after you came to get me, and I didn't once feel a thing.

It's like this. You were the best at mythology when we were kids, and I remember one day we were reading about Icarus. And you remember this, I know you do, but I'm going to tell you the story again anyway. Icarus made wings out of wax to escape a prison. But when he was outside for the first time in years there was the sun hanging up in the sky above him and he thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He flew closer and closer and his wings started to melt, but he didn't give a good goddamn. He kept flying up until he couldn't fly anymore, and his eyes were probably burning, and his skin was probably burning, but still he didn't care. And then his wings melted all the way and he fell miles and miles into the ocean and brained himself on a rock, that poor stupid asshole. And I'll tell you what: I'm no better. I'm no fucking better.

III.
You piss me off so God damn much. Jesus Roosevelt Christ. I've got

your number, you reckless fucking dumbass.

IV.

This is the God's honest truth: I hated that asshole. With his big pearly whites and his spit-shined uniform — what kind of sorry schmuck lets somebody dress him up like that? — prancing around in his tights and acting like he knows what it means to lay in the mud for six days straight, what it feels like when the enemy's got too close and the only thing left to do is close your hands around their neck and lock your muscles up and wait until the life snuffs out.

I've done that. You've seen me.

One kid, just a little after I shipped out, not even three months in, he showed up back from leave with the comic books. I laughed in his God damn face. I ain't proud of it, but I did. I was sore and tired and couldn't get that smell out of my nose, like car parts on a hot day at the garage. Felt like I was bathing in it. Still do. Blood doesn't wash out, no matter what they tell you. Not even cold water can do it. So anyway I'm standing there in my boots that are getting holes in them and I'm reeking like the cold mud and shit and whatever the hell else I'd been stepping in, and this green kid settles down by the fire, his eyes too big for his face the way yours used to be, his uniform all clean, and he pulls out this comic book. I about lost it right then. I didn't know if I was going to yell or cry or sock him one, but it was like there was a huge rushing in my ears and I couldn't think past the anger. Right then all I could think was of that kid's body laying on the ground, his eyes staring sightless and bloodshot up at mine. I didn't want that thought to belong to me. I hated thinking it, but I couldn't make the image go away. In the end I reigned it in; you'd be proud. All I said was, that mook doesn't give a shit about you, pal. He's never fought in a war and he never will.

And Jesus Christ, how's that for irony?

But later I felt like shit and apologized, and even later that kid got his arm blown off by a Kraut hand grenade and was shipped back home. So whatever that says. War stories don't really have much by way of morals or lessons, but I figured I'd tell it anyway.

I don't still hate him, or at least not the same way that I used to. How could I? It's impossible. Got his patch sewn on my left arm and everything. And I'll wear it, too, until the day I die. I'll tell you, I

should have appreciated that comic book while I had the God damn chance. I was stupid then. The colors in it were so bright and vivid, so much nicer than the gray and green we've got here. But when he got carted out of the field he had his comic books in his pack and they shipped home with him. So all that color he brought is back home, now. Which is alright. I figure that's where those types of happy things belong.

V.

What do you say, after this I'll take you someplace nice, and I'm not talking about one of the dance halls you hate so bad either. It's so God damn cold in Brooklyn your lungs make a louder racket than our broken radiator and Mister Eli's mangy cat combined, and then here mud sucks at our shoes and gets under my fingernails and I swear to God that I haven't felt warm in half a year. Neither have you, no matter how hard you pretend otherwise.

So if we ever get out of this frozen wet hell we're going out to the Grand Canyon. I tell you, I dream of the Grand Canyon. We'll be there at night, just you and me, and throw rocks off the edge to hear them make land a thousand miles down, thunking like fat little raindrops into a puddle. That's all I want to do anymore. Lay on the baked red ground next to you until my bones heat up. Warm again. Warm again with no more of that thick dried blood smell in my nose, just you, clean like your soap. You'd be heaven for anyone, but you're especially heaven for a sinner like me. And even if we freeze where we lay like that Nazi splinter group we found — I heard the desert gets real cold at night, or maybe you told me that — at least it'll be because we wanted to be there, and at least the air will be dry.

VI.

I saw it — did you know that? I did. You've always been sentimental in stupid ways, can never say it out loud, always got to find a different way to show it. I get it, you know. I do. Hell, I did almost the same thing with your letters before I lost them, keeping them tucked up in my pocket every time I was out in the field. And isn't that a riot and a half?

Maybe you think about it like a good luck charm. Or maybe you just like to see her pretty face — I wouldn't blame you. I'd like her for myself if it wasn't plain as day to me the way you are about her.

Remember what your ma used to say? “Gone in the head.” Well that’s what you are. If there wasn’t a war on you two would already be living upstate in some real nice brownstone with two dogs and a kid. As it is, when the two of you get out of this alive, that’s where you’ll end up anyway. Don’t be nervous about it. She’ll say yes. She’d say yes if you asked right now. She’d wear a God damn ring from a Cracker Jack box if it was all you had, trust me on that. She’s your forever girl.

At least those are the things I’m gonna tell you the night before you propose, nervous and pacing and wanting to practice on me. Then again, maybe I won’t live to see it. Sometimes I hope to God I won’t. When it comes right down to it I don’t know that I’ll be able to do it. I don’t know if I’ve got it in me; I don’t know if I can just stand there while you seal the deal. I’m no good at watching you walk away from me.

You know, after the table, when they took me in to question me about what happened, they gave me an out. They told me they’d discharge me and I could go home — I’m serious. Due to psychological injury, they said. Do you understand that? I think about it every God damn day of my life. I could have gone home. I could be home right now. I could be sitting in our ugly little shoebox trying to get the radiator to work. I could be at the fish market, or even taking a girl on a date. But God fucking save me, I couldn’t do it. My one dream came true but I didn’t take it because I didn’t want to watch you leave. Not quite yet. I’m selfish and I want to hang on until I can’t anymore.

The God’s honest truth is that I ain’t ever gonna love again. She’s your true north. I know what that means, because you’re mine.

VII.

You scare the hell out of me. Every hour of every God damn day. You scare me to fucking death.

I have a theory, a theory about war, and it works like this — all of us, whether we enlisted or hit the lottery, we tell ourselves stories about why we’re out here. Some guys who get the draft say it’s God’s plan for them, and some guys who enlist say they’re doin it for Uncle Sam or their sweethearts or their mamas, or maybe even their shellshocked daddies.

I didn’t come to war for you and I didn’t fight to keep it away. The way I got out here was cowardly. But the more I fought the more I

told myself my story. It's so much easier when you're telling yourself a story. Because the truth is that we're not here for God or for our nation or even for our families or our sweethearts. Maybe we think so at first or we convince ourselves afterwards, which is easy enough to do when you're humping through the muck or trying not to catch hypothermia in the forest. In the field it's a different story. Suddenly all the pretty pictures you've painted fade away and all that's left is the ugly gore and the sweat. It turns out that there's not one God damn thing that's glorious about death. You're not out here for them. You're out here because that's just the way the chips fell.

I told you, you heard me: I told you never to follow me into Hell. Now I'm not vain enough to think that's why you're out here now — if there's any person in what's left of this God forsaken planet who's part of a bigger picture, it'd be you. But I'll keep saying it until it sticks. You got nothing to prove. I'm not worth much, I damn well know that, but I'll ask you anyway: Stay for me. If you leave me alone in this world I'll turn into something terrible. I'll turn into the nasty creature that's growing inside me. This war, it'll swallow me whole.

VIII.

If I close my eyes I can pretend I'm back home, except there's maybe not so many horns honking. It's better than being on the front, though. Hell of a lot better than that.

Remember on the real hot days when we used to dangle our legs off the dock? At around four o'clock the hot dog stand shaded us until sundown. I was peeled and blistered and burned from working all day out in the sun anyway, but I didn't want to go to the apartment because it wasn't often you'd get out. You were always so careful when you brought your sketchbook for drawing, making sure not to drop it in, but everything you drew those days ended up getting sprayed a little by the waves anyway. There must be a million drawings of me and the landscape there that's smudged in tiny circles the shape of the water droplets.

I remember one year, when we first got a place, the kid in the apartment below us — really just a kid — he died in the night from the fever that was taking everyone in the neighborhood. And you were so damn upset, all hunched over, red around the eyes. I slung my arm around you and said a bunch of bullshit nonsense about how it was fine and at least he didn't hurt anymore. But then I put my face in your hair and thanked God it was him and not you. I thought, if He

had to take someone, at least it wasn't you. It was the worst thing I ever thought but it's true.

Tell you a secret? One month out a guy got hurt bad in a shelling. Reminded me of that sick kid downstairs, the same hair, you remember — curly? Just like then there wasn't nothing I could have done to help him. His belly looked like Swiss cheese from all the shrapnel. Fell down next to me. There was no saving him, and he was staring right at me — it's not like I could leave him there, not when he was looking like that. He said please, and so I shot him in the face. I was glad when he was done wheezing and gasping. I was so damn glad: I didn't have to listen to it anymore. So maybe that's the worst thing I ever thought, now that I remember it.

Water's different here. It mists off the Thames, and by night I half expect the air to freeze while I try to walk through it. There's no way I'd dip my feet in, or want you to. And what's there to draw? Can't even see Big Ben or any of that from where we are. Everything's so gray, I miss the big red burns I'd get that made me have to sleep on my belly for weeks on end. I don't think you could ever really stay out long enough to get a burn that way but I remember that your nose would get it bad and turn all red and peel a little on the bridge of it. I thought that was funny as hell. Sweet. I don't know why, but it was. Bet you don't even burn now. That's a good thing, I keep telling myself. In this world of bad things that's one really good thing.

IX.

You remember staying up late reading Dracula out loud to each other under the covers, back when your ma was still alive? And we were havin the best time, scaring ourselves like a couple of idiots, until all of a sudden a police siren started up outside and we both screamed fit to wake the people in West Virginia. Then your ma came flying down the hall with a bread knife of all things at the ready, and she made us turn out the lights. So we did, and then of course I tried to act all tough, but I slept next to you that night anyway. Funny, I guess. Turns out that you're still my favorite hiding place. Funny, too: turns out there are scarier things in the dark than vampires.

Tell you something. Tell you another secret, because this one, this one I won't ever tell, not to God, not to a priest, and sure as hell not to you. In that base we burned the bodies in a furnace. I hadn't eaten in days. The truth is simple. The smell made me hungry.

X.
There's this feeling I get after a firefight, when the shells are still bouncing across the ground, and I'm still a little blind and deaf, but the whole world is crystal clear, and I could just fall to the ground and cry like a baby because I'm still alive. The first time I felt it I thought I was going to burst out of my skin. And then everything rushed back so quick I felt like a newborn. The whole world was brand-new and I was on top of it. I could swallow it whole.

You think I haven't seen the same look on your face?

The closest I've ever been to the Garden of Eden is the genesis on the battlefield when the shrapnel's still falling like hail on a tin roof. You look at me with those blue eyes all hot and electric in your face, blood on your cheek, soot smudged over your nose. Bone of my bones. Were you taken from my rib? You must have been, or maybe I was made from yours. And God damn, I want it. I want back inside you. I want you now, same as I wanted you before, prettier than hell even with a bloodied nose and split knuckles. Don't care you were smaller. Liked it, even — same as I like you this way too. You make me hungry. You understand? You make me hungry. That mouth pink like spun sugar, though it doesn't stop you from talking fit to cut anyone down to bits with your angry words. A spitfire since you learned how to speak, and I'll tell you something, it's hell to love a fighter.

Anyway, Jesus — I shouldn't even be thinking it, much less writing it down. I used to love you so sweet, the way kids love, the way I was supposed to. Then it turned greedy and true. If there's any Heaven that's fit for me it'd be all your pale skin under my hands for the rest of eternity. I wouldn't need anything else. Not food or drink or sleep. Just my hands on you and your sweet love-sounds.

I think it's fit I take it to the grave. Wouldn't make you any happier. In fact it'd do nothing but put you in danger — that ain't something I want. It's another story I tell myself, I guess. That I'm being noble and doing it for you, when really I'm just being scared, and can't do it to myself.

XI.
Here's a story your mama told me.

When she came over on the boat she kept getting sick and she couldn't

figure out why. Eventually this lady came up to see if she was fine, and she asked her, when are you due? And your ma said, no, I'm only seasick.

I'm supposed to take the rest of this story to the grave, but I doubt anyone will care to find these anyway.

So it turned out the woman from the Old Country was right, and your ma cried herself sick because she was so scared and alone. You see now why I was supposed to take this one to the grave? She asks the woman, the hell will I do? I don't have any money and nobody on God's green Earth will hire an Irish girl fresh off the ship, especially when she's in a family way. Now the woman, she was feeling terrible about this, terrible for this young girl who had nowhere else to turn. And the woman's husband, he'd died in the war. So she slipped off the band around her finger and put it on your mama's. Then she told your ma her last name, and her husband's first name, and said it was time to start over again anyway. So your ma did. She bought a plot at the cemetery and said it was your da's. That grave is empty, same way mine will be. That rosary you got with you, the one you think is his -- it was hers. It was hers all along.

After she finished whispering it out to me, the whole truth of her life, she started hacking up a lung. I got her water, I remember, and then I asked — well, what anyone else would, I guess. I asked why she did it. Why she picked me to tell. She looked me in the eye and she said, remember how she used to call me, she said, "James Buchanan, I'm not long for this Earth. I told you because I know. You and me; you and me, James, we're the same kind of storyteller."

I still don't understand what it was that she knew. I got my suspicions. I think she saw in me the thief and impostor she saw in herself. We understood one another, your ma and I. I was a good kid, back home — straight A's till I dropped out, good at my job, good to my dates, a gentleman. I was so proud of those things, and turns out it don't matter at all. Even though you were the troublemaker we were both from the wrong side of the tracks. Brooklyn tough, and no changing us — do anything for each other, won't we? I've stolen and lied and cheated, and mostly, I've done it for you. Not because you asked — you didn't ask your ma either, and you would never ask anyone, considering you'd choke on your pride if you ever tried swallowing it. But like me, she did it for you all the same.

She told me that at first she was scared as hell of loving you. She said she didn't know if she could, because she thought she'd always be

waiting for you to die, and she couldn't stand anyone else dyin on her. I finally bucked up and asked her how long she had actually loved you for. You know what she told me? She said, that's a stupid question.

She died in the night while we slept in our beds. I heard the news first, because I guess I was just up and out first, taking her bread, or soup, or something. All I saw of her was her white hand while they took her away. I remember walking all the way back to your apartment, hadn't seen you in maybe a day and a half, and I knew I had to tell you but I also knew I didn't want to. So I let myself in, quiet as a mouse, and sure enough you were still asleep in bed. All I could do was look at you and wish to God that I could put a spin on this one, too — make it all alright again.

At the end she was so tired.

Never really thought about the future. Never really could think much past you. In that respect, your ma and I had something in common, God rest her soul. But neither of us, I don't think, were ever meant for much. Here's the truth — baby, here's the truth. I've got a rootless heart. I don't think I'm meant for loving, or at least not anymore. And I should die out here. I'm the kind of guy who's not meant to go back. I try to imagine a life after this and it just won't come. So forget about me, will you? If it'll make you happy. Live glorious, eat like a king, laugh until the sun comes up, never look back. Don't you dare look back. More than anything I want to know that you kept on. More than anything I want to know that you took on the world — everything else seems to matter less and less.

So how long have I loved you for? Womb to tomb, sweetheart. Since before I was even here at all. I get it now, you understand. Your ma was right. It really is a stupid question.

XII.

Look, I'm sorry I worried you so bad. I'm just fine, except maybe now you know how I felt last year, when you almost bled out under my hands while I stood there like some kind of helpless schmuck, not having the first God damn idea what to do. I don't remember a whole lot about the ordeal, but I do remember you shoving your belt between my teeth. I remember I wasn't allowed to make a lick of noise due to how far behind enemy lines we were, and I remember trying like hell not to. It hurt, sure. Hurt like the Devil himself was digging down and trying to pull out my insides.

I remember after it was over you pressing your forehead against mine. You didn't say a word but I knew you were afraid. I shut my eyes and for a second I could pretend I was back in Brooklyn. I pretended that our faces were too close because we were sharing a bed in the middle of winter and you had rolled over in your sleep. I swear to God, in that second I could smell the charcoal on your hands from drawing all day, and the motor oil on my skin from working at the garage. When you let out a breath I could even smell the sharp sweet tang of oranges.

Right then I didn't tell myself any stories. I was dying, and I was glad that it was happening while I was next to you.

You know, I don't think I've ever told you the whole story before. It's like everything started around that winter. Like I orbit it, sucked into that year by some big cosmic force of gravity.

It was 1940, the year you kept almost dying on me, but this was before all that. Winter was just coming, and the cough you had was only little, not keeping you in bed for weeks at a time. I knew that even if I couldn't pay for heat I had to pay at least for some more blankets or quilts. I remember thinking that even if I could steal food I'd need money for your medications.

It was when I got laid off from the garage, and the factory jobs had run out in Brooklyn and Queens — I think this part you know. I went all over Manhattan, but no one in Midtown wanted to hire me. Finally I ended up at a deli and I flattered the old fella behind the counter with some bullshit I can't even remember now, maybe how great their cheesecake was, but anyway he finally let me in on a few trade secrets about who around town was looking for help. Anyway, I got the gig at the docks in Chelsea. It was only part time and eventually I had to replace it with the dock job back home, but it was alright money while I could get it. I worked maybe five hours that day, and on the way back to our rickety place I was feeling so lucky I stopped by the market. If you were a dame I probably would have tried to buy you a ring. I could have taken on the whole world because I had the dollar fifty in my pocket they paid me for working on such short notice. It was the first real money I felt like I'd had in years.

So I was walking around the market, looking around, dried this, canned that…and then I saw some oranges. Heavenly choirs sang when I looked at those oranges. They were so bright and I'd just worked a hard, cold shift, and you had been looking blue and sick for weeks. And all of a sudden the inspiration struck me, and I knew what

I had to do.

I swear to God I haggled with Mr. O'Leary over that one single orange for fifteen minutes straight. There was something important to me that day about buying it with the money I'd just made. Finally I got it low enough.

I'll never forget the look on your face when I came in the door and tossed it to you. I can't even describe it. I'd do anything on earth to make you look at me again like that. I'd fill your whole room up with oranges. I'd fill the apartment with them. The building, even. Give them to you in baskets until the day I die and arrange for them to be sent even after that.

Well, then of course you started worrying over the price and wouldn't hear of eating it all on your own. So you made me split it with you. I can still taste it — the way it broke so sweet and tart on my tongue, got sticky all over my fingers. Do you remember, we even kept squeezing the skin because little bursts of flavor would puff out away from it that we could see and smell. I don't think I've ever tasted anything like that before or since. It was like a whole summer feast laid out right in front of us, even though it was just one fruit and not summer at all, but instead that terrible time of year when winter sneaks down; starts killing the flowers.

Never told another soul this, and I guess I never will, but I think of that orange, that one evening, every single time when I'm sure I'm about to snuff it for real. Thought about it in my first firefight and thought about it when the Germans stuck me full of needles and sliced up the soles of my feet. And when I was shot the other day and so sure it was over — good-bye, motherfuckers, I'm finally going back home — I wasn't all that scared. In that one minute it was fine — everything was alright. I bought an orange. You smiled at me. And Jesus Christ, it was fantastic.

XIII.

There are a bunch of stories in this world. I know this because I slept through every single one of them in school with you snoring away right beside me. Long stories, short stories, ghost stories. Sad stories and romance stories, parables, tall tales, and even the stories that have happy endings — And let me tell you, men on Mars make more sense to me than those do these days.

I'm the story that'll never get told, but that doesn't much bother me. They'll remember you which is as it should be. Just like me, they were caught off guard. Nobody ever saw you coming, not the army, not the country. You went and blindsided us all. And now that all the storytellers have got a hold of you, you're gonna live forever.

I remember maybe third day of Catechism when Sister Catherine said that each and every one of us are sinners and there wasn't nothing to be done for it. And I believe it of me, hell yes I do — I'm a killer, stone cold. Some people are good at math and some people are good at art, but me, I'm good at shooting, and it scares me right to the bone the things I'd do for you. When they turn me away from the pearly gates I imagine they'll give me a list full of the names of the Germans I killed for you and won't look twice at what I think about doing every time I curl up around you at night, sayin it's just to keep warm. Because it's fine and all to kill for your country, I think, but not quite the same when you're killing for just one person in particular.

And besides, I've got a whole laundry list of other sins, past even those. I'm a liar and a coward, and once I got the draft I burned the letter so that you'd never find it. I'm so God damn afraid to die, but it's not for me. It's because I can't leave you alone in a world as ugly as this one. Somehow you don't know it, but there's no justice here, not anymore. All the word about the death camps. The shit Morita put up with before he shipped out. You took a knife to the neck last year and still you can't see it, don't understand that Hell isn't some place underneath us, all filled up with fire and brimstone. Hell is right here, and I've been damned for a long time.

I know you're not alone without me anymore. You've got your girl and you've got the boys. I know you can take care of yourself, and it puts me at a loose ends, how you can keep safe on your own now. You don't need me. Doesn't mean I'm not still afraid for you, not scared shitless that this world is gonna eat you alive.

But at least now I understand, I think, the feeling you had when you talked about doing right by your country, because I don't mind living in Hell if it means doing right by you, just the way I'd strip the boots off a million dead Nazis if it meant your feet staying warm and dry.

I see you worrying your daddy's rosary at night, the poor battered old thing, and I wonder how you can still pray. I went to confession a hundred times until I gave up on it, because no matter how many Hail Marys I recited in the dark with you laying next to me, it didn't stop. Sister Catherine would spit on me because I don't have much need for

God out here, but I'm glad you do. I'm real glad one of us does. But you keep giving me those big sad eyes of yours, like I'm breakin your heart when I try to explain it to you, and so I'll give it another go, just one last try, even if you'll never know about it —

Ave Maria, gratia plena, get him out of this war, and if you've gotta take someone then take me, because I've got nothing real to go home to but he's got a girl now and I can see the hope written all over his face when he sees her. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, pray for us sinners, but don't spend too much time on my immortal soul, because not even divine intervention can help me now. I know when to walk away from a fight and trying my damnedest not to need him was a losing battle.

I won't be in the history books; that's for you. But I loved you first. As long as they get that right, I don't care what they say.

End Notes

Please correct our French if it was horribly wrong! Some translations:

J'étudié l'art -- I study art
Sans dec? -- No kidding?

Tu es le pire putain -- You're the fucking worst.

Works inspired by this one

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[Podfic] The Thirteen Letters by wolveheart

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